WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN CREATIVE EXPRESSION
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS

by

Marion Healey-Ogden

B.S.N., The University of British Columbia, 1974
M.A., The University of Victoria, 1989

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APPROVAL

Name: Marion Healey-Ogden
Degree: Master of Education
Thesis Title: WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING IN CREATIVE EXPRESSION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF SIGNIFICANT LIFE EVENTS

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Deborah Polf
Professor, Acting Dean of Graduate Studies
UNBC

Supervisor: Dr. Martha MacLeod
Associate Professor, Nursing Program
UNBC

Committee Member: Dr. Judith Lapadat
Assistant Professor, Education Program
UNBC

Committee Member: Dr. Tom Strong
Assistant Professor, Education Program
UNBC

External Examiner: Dr. Brenda Cameron
Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing
University of Alberta

Date Approved: April 2, 2001
Abstract

Women's everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression seem to be taken for granted and overlooked by researchers and counsellors. These experiences are frequently unrecognized for their meaning and significance. The aim of this interpretive study was to explore the meaning of women's everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression. Hermeneutic phenomenology was the research approach taken. I interviewed six women in their 30's and 40's, about their experiences of engaging in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events.

This study found that by engaging in creative expression the women experienced being on journeys where their worlds changed. The process and products of their expression enabled the women to see their worlds from new vantage points. They experienced a shift from times in their lives when, as a result of their many life roles, the women omitted creative endeavours or they remained disconnected from their creative expression. Without this creativity as an integral part of their lives, in essence they lost part of their very being. By giving themselves permission to express the pain of their significant life events within the creative expressive process they gradually faced their pain and, by so doing, rediscovered themselves. Through the creative expressive process the women became deeply attuned to their bodies, minds, and souls. Their expression became the window to their seeing, understanding, and experiencing their new ways of being.

The women experienced a rebirth of themselves as they experienced being free to be vulnerable within the creative experience. Within their creative
expression, the women experienced movement from feeling oppressed in their many life roles to feeling free to meet their own needs. They moved from nurturing others in order to nurture themselves, to nurturing themselves and then others.

The women's creative expression and the changes it engendered were directed by themselves. The women were their own healers. They experienced that engaging in creative expression became the source of their survival. The women did survive and, once again, experienced wellness.

By engaging in creative expression it is possible for women to maintain wellness before, during, and beyond significant life events. This research raises a question about the value of therapists assuming directive roles within women's everyday creative expression. The results of this research suggest that it is important for counsellors to acknowledge the value of creative expression and to support, rather than direct women in their creative journeys.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

Dedication

Chapter One
Introduction
  Background
  Problem and Research Question
  The Research Approach
  Significance of This Study
  Conclusion

Chapter Two
Literature Review
  Research Literature
  Reflective Practice Literature
    Creative Expressive Programs and Offerings
    Creative Expression Within Counselling Practice
  Descriptive Literature
    Practice Literature
    Self-Help Literature
    Creative Experiences and Significant Life Events
    Open Studio Approach
  Self-Reflective Literature

Wellness Literature

Conclusion

Chapter Three
Research Approach
  Historical Approach
  Methodology
    Participant Selection
    Ethical Considerations
    Interview Process
  Process of Analysis and Interpretation

Conclusion
### Chapter Four

**Women's Journeys: Experiencing Creative Expression**

**Introduction**

**Women Participants**

**Profiles of Research Participants**

- Carol
- Penny
- Isis
- Susan
- Lisa
- Barbara

**Participants' Journeys**

- Journeying: Past, Present, and Future
- Defining Moments
- Winding Course of the Journeys

**Lifeline Within the Journeys**

- Self-Nurturing
- Nurturing Others
- Being Energized by Community

**Conclusion**

---

### Chapter Five

**Connections and Responses: Relating To Creative Expression**

**Being Drawn Toward and Being Repelled From Creative Expression**

**Valuing Self**

**Trusting In and Respecting Self and The Creative Process**

- Being Free To Be Vulnerable

**Connecting with and Discovering Self**

- Experiencing Physical Sensations and Emotional Feelings
  - Responding With One's Body
  - Responding in Depth and Degree
  - Relating With the Female Self and With Others

**Externalizing Thoughts and Feelings**

- Healing Through Self-Reflection

**Conclusion**
Chapter Six
Rebirth of Self: Creating New Worlds 128
Experiencing a Shift in Control 129
Experiencing a Transition and Rebirth of Self 132
Giving Self Permission to Change 133
Forgiving Self and Others 133
Validating Self 135
Accepting Self 136
Nurturing Self to Nurture Others 139
Creating New Personal Worlds 140
Conclusion 144

Chapter Seven
Conclusion and Implications 146
Research Approach 146
A Shifting Perspective 148
Creatively Expressing As Looking Inward 150
Seeing One’s Self Through a New Lens of Meaning 153
Creatively Expressing As Looking Outward 155
A New Being 157
Being in a New World in a New Way 157
Experiencing Harmony as Healing 160
Being and Becoming Through Community 162
Practice Implications 163
Recommendations For Future Research 165
Conclusion 168

References 169

Appendix A Letter to Colleagues and Acquaintances 176
Appendix B Informed Consent 177
Appendix C Information About Therapists 179
Appendix D Guiding Questions for Hermeneutic Interview 180
Appendix E Participants’ Creative Expressive Products 181
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been open to sharing their lived experiences. From these women, I learned so very much about the experiences of women; about my personal creative expressive journey; and about my roles as counsellor, mental health nurse educator, and researcher. My wish is that by participating in this research, these women will take away a little kernel of new understanding about themselves and about their place in the world of women.

I would like to honour another very special group of women. They are struggling to complete their own theses. This group of women has offered the most amazing support to me during my long writing process. I am grateful for their constant presence, long e-mail chats, and thesis chatter over cups of coffee.

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Dedication

This dedication is to the many women who have seemingly lost their very selves during the time of taking on roles that include nurturing others. It is my sincere hope that they might experience, through creative expression, the possibility of the power and joy of finding their ways to nurture themselves and of experiencing new ways of being. Within that possibility I hope they will experience new-found strength from communities of people in order to continue to survive and, in new ways, to potentially nurture those around them.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Creative expression, from painting to cooking, is part of everyday life for many people. Often, people engage in creative expression to feel good about themselves and their lives, and/or to live with or resolve difficulties. Historically, the power of this everyday experience is apparent for composers such as Mozart, Rossini, and Wagner, for artists such as Kahlo, Michelangelo, Munch, and van Gogh, and for authors such as Plath, Poe, and Woolf (Panter, Panter, Virshup, & Virshup, 1995).

Counselling is a broad term that includes a range of psychotherapeutic approaches. These approaches reflect theoretical orientations that distinguish various types of therapeutic communication (Hackney & Cormier, 1996). With the recognition that the process of expressing oneself through art is valuable in peoples’ recovery from significant life events, art therapy evolved as a mode of counselling. Art is the focus of art therapy and it is common for various psychotherapeutic approaches to be combined with art therapy (Malchiodi, 1998). Other specific creative therapies, for example music therapy and drama therapy, have emerged in a similar way as art therapy. In these examples, music and drama are considered to be the main modes of expression within their respective fields. Clients are guided by creative specialists in each of these specific areas.

When art is included within counselling, it is usually considered an adjunct and, in contrast to art as therapy, is considered to be art within therapy (Gladding, 1998). A variety of modes of expression are included in counselling, for example
drawing, painting, music, journalling, poetry, and movement, to guide clients to express their emotions and experiences. When creative expression is combined with psychotherapy, clients are better able to orally express themselves and to gain insight (Malchiodi, 1998). In comparison with art therapists, counsellors, also known as psychotherapists or therapists, often have general rather than specific knowledge of one or more aspects of creative expression.

Art therapy has evolved to include therapeutic practices that range from being directive and analytical, to co-constructing meanings with clients in nondirective environments. This evolution is reflective of the theoretical stance that art therapists have adopted. Traditionally, a key aspect of art therapy has been analysis of art products and this analysis is primarily based on Jung's and Freud's work (Allan, 1988; Gladding, 1998; Malchiodi, 1998). Art therapists who practice in this analytic manner often interpret others' art according to predetermined meanings. The art process in this form of art therapy is usually goal oriented and directed or influenced by art professionals (Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Allen, 1995; Furth, 1988; Landgarten, 1981). In contrast, a constructionist stance within art therapy includes the belief that meanings are considered to be constructed between clients and art therapists in discussion about clients' art (Riley, 1994). In this example, the therapist maintains art as the therapeutic focus but does not impose personal and predetermined interpretations on clients' art or on clients themselves.

Art therapists vary in their emphasis on the importance of the process and the products of art. Some art therapists place most emphasis on the interpretation of symbolism that appears in the products of art. Other art therapists emphasize the
therapeutic nature of the process, together with the symbolism that emerges in the products. The symbolism assists clients to visualize, experience, and interpret the imagery that they have created (Malchiodi, 1998). This latter form of art therapy is closely aligned with creative expression in counselling. Not unlike art therapists, therapists who have a general knowledge of creative expression adopt varied theoretical stances that inform their practices. It is the therapists who believe in the power of creative expression whose practices are most similar to those of art therapists. As I previously stated, the difference lies in the focus of art. For art therapists, the focus is art as therapy, and for therapists in counselling, the focus is art within therapy.

People are able to help themselves with the guidance of a specialist (Albert, 1996; Allen, 1995; Cappacchione, 1996; Samuels & Lane, 1998) or generalist in creative expression (Gladding, 1998). Both counselling and art therapy cast the therapist in a guiding or directive role. In counselling, we may have overlooked the ways in which individuals engaging in creative expression are not guided or influenced by therapists. That is, when people engage, on their own, in everyday forms of creative expression, they seem better able to deal with significant life events and/or to maintain wellness (Crawford, 1991). This everyday engagement in painting or playing music, for example, begs the question of whether everyday creative expression and directive approaches in counselling should be linked. Few studies have examined people's everyday experiences of creative expression although some studies in the literature address aspects of this topic. This everyday experience merits greater examination.
Background

About six years ago I decided to explore, in an informal way, the role of art in people’s lives. My decision was prompted by hearing the occasional anecdotal comment from acquaintances about the value of drawing and painting in their recuperative processes of dealing with physical and/or psychological difficulties. The exploration that I embarked upon took place so that I could satisfy a nagging personal curiosity about the role of creative expression in people’s recuperation and well-being. I undertook this exploration as a component of my professional development but did not engage in a systematic study. Rather, I discussed with counsellors; social workers; and art, movement, occupational, and recreation therapists; how they and their clients used creative expression and were affected by it. In the settings of the acute psychiatric ward of the local hospital, intermediate and extended care facilities, a correctional centre, the sexual assault centre, the child development centre, and an art studio, I discovered that residents and community participants used a variety of modes of creative expression. Some examples of these modes of creative expression are painting, writing poetry, and engaging in drama or in dance. People expressed themselves creatively for the purposes of recreation through to getting in touch with their emotions and life experiences.

Although this exploration was informal, the following two issues emerged. First, when I asked professionals what they saw as the future involvement of creative expression in health care, many of them strongly embraced the importance of developing opportunities for creative expression within the community. They indicated that the availability of a drop-in art centre or opportunities for expression
that involve painting, movement, or writing, are needed within the community. The professionals considered that these options would allow for the possibility of healing and the promotion of wellness. Second, as I searched for the answer to my original question about the role of creative art in a person's recuperation and well-being, I heard inconsistencies between health professionals' verbal descriptions of people's experiences with creative expression and descriptions in the professional literature. For the most part, the health care professionals whom I interviewed described people's creative expressive experiences as being important in their lives. However, those professionals seldom referred to the intense nature of people's experiences, even though the magnitude of engaging in creative expression was highlighted in the professional literature.

The more I read, the more I realized that there is a strong connection between creative expression and healing (Crawford, 1991; Rockwood, 1999; Samuels & Lane, 1998). I continued to read research, as well as professional and descriptive literature on the topic, while, on three separate occasions during the four years prior to beginning this thesis, I used creative expression myself to work through life events that were significant to me. One particularly challenging event was my receipt of a lay-off notice from a long-held job, four weeks after my husband also had been laid off from work. On each occasion, I found that the use of creative expression felt safe and that it was a powerful way for me to see and feel possibilities in my life. I do not consider myself to be very creative in an artistic sense, yet the arts, particularly drawing and listening to music, were powerful catalysts to move me forward in my recuperative journey. Forward movement only
happened when I reached deep inside and connected with my inner being. I learned
to let go of what I thought I should create and to allow images to emerge in their
own way and time. Before long, my drawing became my struggle externalized. I
could manipulate the external drawings in ways that I could not manipulate my
internal self. For example, I cut out and destroyed part of one drawing that
represented issues in my life. On my own and in the privacy of my home, I
experienced the intensity of engaging in creative expression at the time of an
emotionally painful significant life event.

Problem and Research Question

As I reviewed the literature on creative expression and significant life events it
soon became apparent to me that little research has focused specifically on the
experience of engaging in creative expression. The occasional study that did focus
on women’s experiences pointed toward a particular experience, such as a spiritual
journey (e.g., Clark, 1999). In contrast, I found that the descriptive and anecdotal
literature did focus on women’s experiences, but that literature was not
research-based. Rather, it often was objective descriptions of women’s experiences
(e.g.; Estep, 1995; Merriam, 1998) instead of being an interpretive inquiry of
women’s subjectively described experiences.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a deep understanding of
women’s everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression within the
context of significant life events. Initially, I planned to study men and women who
were experiencing a range of significant life events from happy to extremely difficult.
Since only women volunteered, and as their significant life events were ones of
emotional pain, the research question became: What does it mean for women to engage in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events?

**The Research Approach**

The philosophical and research approach that informs this research is hermeneutic phenomenology. This approach is a methodology that includes both descriptive and interpretive approaches. Hermeneutic phenomenology describes how phenomena appear and, at the same time, interprets the meaning that exists in lived experiences. In Chapter 3, I describe the hermeneutic phenomenological approach in detail and how it informs this study. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to examine a taken-for-granted phenomenon and interpret the meanings embedded in everyday activities. In this research, the everyday activity that was examined was engaging in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events. During this research, people told me about their experiences, but I did not stop there. I listened to their stories and I searched for the meanings that are embodied in each person's experience, including my own experience of engaging in creative expression.

It can be said that hermeneutic phenomenology allows meaning that is taken-for-granted and initially hidden from view to be brought to light. In so doing, an understanding of possibilities is reached within shared worlds. Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges that the researcher's story is interconnected with the stories of those who are the participants (Rockwood, 1999). I bring to this study my life experiences with creative expression related to significant life events. I also bring
my life experiences particularly those of being a woman, wife, mother, daughter, friend, counsellor, nurse, and nurse educator. Through this research I seek to hear and interpret the experiences of others. In hermeneutic phenomenological research, it is acknowledged that all people bring a range of life experiences to their specific experiences of engaging in creative expression. It is the interconnection between other people's and my life experiences with creative expression that is meaningful in this research. This interconnection illuminates understanding of the nature of everyday taken-for-granted experiences.

This study includes data from numerous sources such as research literature, self-reflective literature, the participants' stories and the products of their creative expression, and my experiences and products of creative expression. These data along with an ongoing writing process became the means for me to answer the research question. For the purpose of this study, I considered the nature of the specific significant life event to be irrelevant. More relevant was that each participant thought that her significant life event was of special importance to her and was, according to Webster's (1984) definition of the word significant, “full of meaning” (p. 1325). By creative expression, I mean any form of expression that the participants considered to be creative. This includes, for example, painting, playing and writing music, journalling, quilting, cooking, and throwing clay on a pottery wheel.

The six Caucasian women who volunteered to participate in this study had engaged in creative expression within the context of personal, significant life events. Upon entering the study, the women were not currently involved in psychotherapy. I
asked the women to tell me about their experiences with creative expression associated with significant life events that have occurred within the past five years.

I examined a range of resources including personal experiences of the participants and my own experiences, the etymology of words and phrases, and the products of creative expression, in order for me to make explicit the nature of the lived experiences in question. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach allows for lived experience to be revealed within the writing process (van Manen, 1997). Likewise, artists also reveal personal experiences in their creative products (Smith, 1995). Thinking and experiences throughout this research were important in my understanding of the meaning of engaging in creative expression within the context of an emotionally painful significant life event. It was most appropriate, then, that I continued my personal use of creative expression such as painting, pastel work, and embroidery. As well, I journalled my use of creative expression and my struggle to complete this research. I was open to using any medium and, thus, when I felt compelled to write a poem and it emerged with great urgency, it was appropriate that I include it in my thesis.

Significance of This Study

There is an everyday place for creative expression within and outside counselling that promotes physical and/or psychological healing for a person, regardless of that person's artistic abilities (Rockwell, 1999; Samuels & Lane, 1998). This place does not include analysis of art by a therapist. Although analysis of art has its place in art therapy, it is not the only possibility. A person's everyday
experience of engaging in creative expression also has a potential place within healing and wellness.

If counsellors reflect on the meaning of engaging in creative expression during major life events, then they may develop a better understanding of the power of creative expression and the potential of appropriately supporting clients in its use in their healing and wellness journeys. Given that many people engage in creative expression during significant life experiences without entering into counselling sessions, this research also may be significant for the public in general.

**Conclusion**

In this study, drawing on hermeneutic phenomenology, I interviewed six women about their lived experiences of engaging in creative expression in their everyday lives, and within the context of significant life events that occurred within the past five years. The goal was to interpret the meanings within the women’s everyday experiences. This research may be of value to counsellors and health professionals in order to support people in engaging in and experiencing creative expression as they live with and through major life events. This research also may be beneficial to the general public by being supportive of self-therapy.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I will review selected literature from the disciplines of counselling, art therapy and related creative therapeutic fields, nursing, occupational therapy, medicine, and psychology. Within these diverse bodies of literature, the focus will be four-fold on: (a) the researched relationship between creative expression and healing, (b) reflective practice literature, (c) descriptions of the creative expressive experience, and (d) wellness and creative expression. Included in this review will be descriptive and anecdotal accounts in the professional and lay literatures that describe the general and specific impact of engaging in creative expression within significant life events.

Research Literature

The relationship between creative expression and healing has been extensively described in the research literature. Healing as a result of, for example painting, is commonly depicted in this literature as static or focused on outcomes or on attributes, rather than as dynamic or focused on people’s stories of their personal experiences. Those outcomes indicate that creative expression yields particular benefits, for example, positive life changes.

Lynch’s (1996) relational study of 34 participants with disabilities who were involved in a community-based art program, utilized a questionnaire and interviews. This study found that the individuals perceived that their self-esteem and socialization had increased as a result of community group expressive art programming. Although this study linked positive life changes to creative expression,
the study did not explore the participants’ actual experiences of engaging in community group expressive art programming. The results of a similar relational study by Manheim (1998) utilized a questionnaire in a test-retest form conducted with 65 students between the ages of 13 and 65 in continuing education art classes. This study revealed that creating three-dimensional artwork is related to self-actualizing growth and that, in particular, openness and self-acceptance increased. Manheim also found that motivation within the artistic process enhances a person's life in general.

McGarry and Prince (1998) used a pre-test and post-test to evaluate a creative expressive program provided in a psychiatric inpatient unit. A nurse facilitator was responsible for promoting discussion and interaction within 13 groups of patients (70 men and 11 women in total) who chose, on their own, to attend. Each group utilized one of the following modes of creative expression, poetry, storytelling, music, and drawing or painting. McGarry and Prince discovered that group poetry or storytelling were the commonly chosen modes of creative expression. Patients typically chose group projects over individual projects and the researchers speculated that this was because competition was reduced and social contacts were increased through group interaction. As well, the authors considered that each person benefited from expressing both positive and negative feelings. The evaluation showed that group creative expression under the guidance of a professional was beneficial to the participants.

Rossiter and Brown (1988) studied staff's impressions of the impact of bibliotherapy (guided discussion of literature, such as books, short stories, and
poetry to achieve therapeutic goals) on patients in a mental health and treatment centre. This exploratory study utilized questionnaires given to 17 facilitators over a nine year period. The study indicated that bibliotherapy provides a non-threatening, enjoyable environment that boosts patients' self-esteem. In this study the influence of others on people's creative expressive experiences was not explored. Lynch's (1996), Manheim's (1998), McGarry and Prince's (1998), and Rossiter and Brown's (1988) studies identified positive life changes that arose from engaging in creative experiences. However, these studies were not designed to reveal the meanings for the participants of engaging in everyday creative expression.

Sutherland's (1999) case study of a 63-year-old woman's experience of engaging in art therapy within the context of multiple medical conditions including multiple sclerosis, found that the client experienced herself in a deep way through creative expression. The woman expressed that experience in her paintings. Sutherland (the therapist and author) concluded that the therapist's willingness to focus empathetically on the client and on the client's art, was the means for the client to fully engage in painting to gain some control of her life. Though this study does not describe this woman's everyday experience with creative expression, and her paintings were interpreted by Sutherland often without the woman's descriptions, the results illuminate the potential for growth and emotional healing by engaging in creative expression. Both McGarry and Prince's (1998) and Sutherland's (1999) studies point toward individual and group creative expression being beneficial in that they facilitate the experience of positive feelings. The specific
value of individual compared with group creative expression is not clear in these studies.

It is common in the art therapy literature for the therapist to use art as a means to promote the emotional health of a person. In Reeves' (1996) case study of an eight-year-old child with conduct disorder, art therapy was used successfully to change the child's behaviour and pattern of attachment. Along with art therapy focused on the child, the mother of the child and the childcare worker were interviewed to corroborate facts that Reeves had identified about the child's attachment. The mother's experience of parenting her child was also included in the data. The child's experience from his perspective was identified through his art but not through his verbal description.

There is some evidence that illuminates, in part, that people can communicate their internal selves in their creative expression. Ulak and Cummings (1997) conducted a pilot descriptive study using an experiencing scale and qualitative observations of one male and six female university students in a counselling centre. Art interventions were used in counselling sessions in which clients were instructed to draw their imagined feelings or situations. The results showed that clients demonstrated an increase in their ability to articulate their feelings over time. In addition, it appeared that there was an increase in clients' views of themselves, possibly such that they were better able to see similarities between themselves and others. This research provides a valuable link to the present study by showing that people can express their internal selves through their art. Heiman's (1994) relational study investigated the effect of alexithymia (absence
of words for emotions) on 24 men's and 76 women's drawings. The participants were asked to draw their illnesses. Even though no significant correlations were shown to exist, all participants were able to communicate their illnesses in their drawings. Heiman's study reveals that clients can communicate nonverbally by engaging in art within counselling, and by expressing their emotions and experiences in the products and process of creative expression. This study points toward the possibility that this communication was a positive experience for the participants. Although Heiman's (1994) and Ulak and Cummings' (1997) studies show that people can communicate their feelings and illnesses in their drawings, the study designs have not permitted an exploration of what it means to clients to draw their experiences.

Salmon's (1993) interpretive study employed a life history approach to ask 10 women about their experiences with HIV. The study included a request for the women to draw their experiences. Salmon's study revealed that the women's drawings were a way for them to explore and express their feelings beyond mere words. In Heiman's (1994), Salmon's (1993), and Ulak and Cummings' (1997) studies the participants followed the directions of the therapists in order to engage in creative expression. The participants were able to see themselves in their art and use their art to communicate aspects of themselves to others. They used the products of creative expression to place themselves in an external and objective place whereby they could see themselves and, in turn could be seen by others. Salmon's study shows women's experiences of engaging in creative expression within the specific context of their experiences with HIV. However, there remains a
gap in the literature regarding women’s everyday experiences with creative expression without the influence of a therapist.

So far in this review, I have discussed research that has sought to examine people’s subjective experiences of engaging in creative expression. Their subjective experiences have been objectively determined and, therefore are static. As well, the relationship between subjective experiences and health is not evident. For the most part, qualitative studies have investigated the relationship between creative expression and health, rather than the relationship between people’s subjective experiences of creative expression and health. One exception is Allen’s (1986) dissertation that is a descriptive study of the power of images for clients and for the author. This study is based on the notion that therapists who have had first-hand experience with “art-making” empower others to become involved with art therapy. The results of this study revealed the power of the art image to guide people to new ways of knowing themselves and of being empowered. Within a setting that joins clients’ art-making with that of a therapist, it is possible that this new knowledge leads clients to view themselves in new ways.

Spencer’s (1997) feminist study is of eight women between the ages of 31 and 78 and their experiences of engaging in creative expression following the trauma of abuse. The participants viewed themselves in the products of their creative expression. In this study, Spencer included her own experiences with creative expression as a way to further understand the participants’ experiences. The study revealed that the women’s self-worth increased by experiencing themselves within their creative expression.
In a descriptive and exploratory study of 35 women between the ages of 18 and 37, with an adult-onset chronic illness, Reynolds (1997) examined women’s narratives of their experiences of engaging in needlecraft. Reynolds found that by engaging in needlecraft, the women experienced a sense of being useful and contributing to others. Their needlecraft was their way to return the care they had previously received. Self-validation emerged for the women from social contacts and from mutual giving between themselves and others. Their needlecraft provided the means to stay connected with their families and friends, forever, by way of a legacy. This study highlights the notion of community in the present and in the future.

In Gonick-Barris’ (1982) descriptive study, the author explored the place of art as therapy in education and its role in personal growth. Written communication between student artists about their artwork linked the images in their artwork to the written messages. As communication between students grew, so did self-understanding of their struggles as student artists. Gonick-Barris showed a connection between art, feelings, and personal growth. This research raises the possibility of personal growth coming from engaging in creative expression with peers, without the influence of a therapist. In Gonick-Barris’ study, it was found that the images plus the written messages were important in a person’s understanding of self.

Although Allen’s (1986), Gonick-Barris’ (1982), Reynolds’ (1997), and Spencer’s (1997) studies explored people’s experiences of engaging in creative expression, these studies were not designed to be interpretive. Consequently, a gap is apparent in the research literature. Specifically, there is a gap in the exploration of
the meaning, for women, of the experience of engaging, on their own without a therapist, in everyday creative expression.

Lawson's (1997) phenomenological study described the lived experiences of three male and three female participants between 19 and 40 years of age, who were creating works of art. The study showed that the participants experienced being healed from emotional pain. Both the processes and products of creative expression were shown to be important to this healing. Although the study did not focus upon participants' emotionally painful significant life events, the study found that creative expression contributed to their experiences of being grounded and therefore of being aware of the healing capacity of art.

The healing aspect of creative expression for older persons was explored by Rugh (1991) in a phenomenological study of one elderly woman's five-year experience of creatively expressing herself in later life. That study revealed three main themes: (a) needing to tell one's own story artistically in a manner congruent with its meaning, (b) wanting to share and to relate to others in a loving manner through the creative expressive process, and (c) using the arts to heal and solve one's problems. Here, the notion of healing is apparent within life change and is related to the woman's creative expression. This study included the woman's everyday experience with creative expression from age 60 and beyond while in an arts program for older adults and within the context of difficulties in her youth and early adulthood.

Clark's (1999) study is an exploration of the experience of writing poetry and engaging in other creative arts during her spiritual journey toward wholeness. During
this journey, she experienced what she describes as a tearing of the veil between the human and the divine. Clark stated that the notion of a veil exists within biblical stories. She related the biblical veil to Jungian defences that separate archetypal material, in other words unconscious material, from conscious thoughts and prevents a sudden blending of the two. Gradual tearing or penetrating the veil is described in this study as being healthy. Clark described her experience of writing poetry. She put words to her feelings and shared those words with others as a way to understand and experience change in herself, and to connect with others.

Lawson's (1997), Rugh's (1991), and Clark's (1999) studies point toward the everyday experience of engaging in creative expression. Both Rugh's (1991) and Clark's (1999) studies identified the healing capacity of connecting with others through sharing creative expressive experiences. Although Clark's (1999) study focused on herself as a woman, it was not designed to take into account a range of significant life events beyond the focus of spirituality. Rugh's (1991) study focused on one woman's experience of engaging in creative expression over time versus within the context of a significant life event and was designed to describe, rather than describe and interpret the taken-for-granted meanings of the woman's experiences.

One study that interprets aspects of this taken-for-granted meaning is Rockwood's (1999) hermeneutic phenomenological study that specifically explored creative expression as a way of healing. Rockwood's study focused on healing from emotionally difficult significant life events. Seven male and 26 female patients, artists, family members, and healthcare providers were included in the study.
because of their experiences of healing with art. Rockwood included her own experiences with creative expression within this study. The study revealed that art and healing occur in ongoing spirals. From the spiral of emotional pain of their significant life events, people “fall or move into darkness” (Rockwood, p. 10). While in this darkness, themes such as “going elsewhere” and the “trigger event to make art” (Rockwood, p. 111) spin together in a spiral fashion. Engaging in creative expression is another spiral. During the creative process the participants experienced “slipping through the veil” (Rockwood, p. 111) which they depicted as a turning point on their healing journeys. Spiritual healing existed at and beyond that turning point and was expressed in their art and experienced as changes in their whole life and in their healing connection and commitment to their communities. The notion of slipping through the veil is the place where the participants experienced moving beyond their pain to a seemingly new world where their spirit is awakened. It is at this time that they experience transcendence and healing and that they turn to healing others.

Rockwood’s (1999) study pointed toward the everyday experience with creative expression. Some of the participants engaged in creative expression in an everyday way, while others’ creative expression was in the presence of therapists, though not directed by those therapists. This study explored the shared background meaning of the participants’ experiences of engaging in creative expression. Consequently, this research leads me to believe that hermeneutic phenomenology has potential as a way to study women’s everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events.
So far, I have indicated that the research literature has shown a relationship between health and creative expression. Limited research pointed toward women's creative expressive experiences being uniquely related to their life experiences. Much of the research literature is static. In other words, people's objective experiences have been, or are commonly determined by objective means, thereby omitting to tell the dynamic stories of what it means for women to engage in an everyday way with creative expression.

The research literature includes many studies in which people were directed in their creative experiences. For example, therapists instructed participants to represent their experiences in drawings, rather than the participants being free to choose their mode of creative expression. The little research that I did locate that described the dynamic nature of people's experiences, was most commonly linked to an open creative environment. The open approach was most often described as existing in institutions within established creative expressive programs and offerings.

Reflective Practice Literature

A second body of literature that exists is the reflective practice literature. It contains descriptions of creative expressive programs and offerings that have developed, internationally. This body of literature includes accounts of clients' experiences within the practice of counselling.

Creative Expressive Programs and Offerings

The reflective practice literature describes creative expressive programs and offerings plus clients' experiences of engaging in creative expression. This literature is not research-based but, rather, descriptive literature that points toward aspects of
women's experiences of engaging in creative expression. Despite the research that shows that there is a relationship between creative expression and healing, the reflective practice literature indicates that it is difficult to access funding for such developments given society's skepticism regarding the value of creative expression in health. Samuels and Lane (1998) discussed an element of distrust that exists in the health care community in accepting creative expression as a legitimate means of healing. They considered that this distrust has resulted from the strong focus on curing within the natural and physical sciences. Though it has been shown through research that creative expression is related to healing, there is no firm evidence that creative expression cures illness. The effect of the creative expressive process and product has been slow to be researched and accepted as having scientific value within people's lives. Samuels and Lane differentiated healing from curing and state "sometimes it is not possible to cure an illness or prevent death, but it is possible to heal the person's whole life so he or she can be fulfilled and connected to life until death" (pp. 96-97). It is with this notion in mind and with the knowledge that research on the effects of creative expression is increasing, that creative expressive programs and related offerings are gradually increasing in health care settings.

Creative expressive programs have been developed within a variety of health care settings, for example a general hospital at the UCLA Medical Center/Cancer Centre for people of all ages (Breslow, 1993); an adolescent unit for adolescents with chronic illness in a general hospital in Australia (Denshrie, 1996); an institute for adults with mental retardation and developmental disabilities in Washington DC (Green & Reinhard, 1995); a bone marrow transplant unit at the Shands Hospital at
the University of Florida where the program is focused on clients, families, and health caregivers (Lane & Graham-Pole, 1994); and numerous hospital and community health based programs in Australia (Marsden, 1993). Some of the programs have a long history of continued operation (e.g., the programs described by Marsden), whereas others have closed due to lack of funding by interested groups or by government (e.g., the program described by Breslow). Without exception, the programs that I reviewed are described as benefiting clients and, in many cases, the programs also benefited families and health care staff.

In addition to these programs in the United States and in Australia, there is growing interest in western Canada to bring together research, education, and program development focused on the value of the creative arts plus on alternative and complementary modes of treatment within health care. This growing interest is evident within a group in Calgary called the CAIT (Creative Arts/Integrative Therapies in Health Care Research Group) and has international representation from a range of disciplines including, but not limited to counselling, nursing, medicine, social work, and artists representing numerous aspects of creative expression (http://westwood.fortunecity.com/calvin/612/). The international representation indicates a broad and growing interest and belief in the value of creative expression in healing.

Given the apparent difficulties in sustaining some creative expressive programs due to lack of both interest and funding, it makes sense, then, to align the existing and proposed development of creative expressive programs with research on the experiences of people's everyday engagement in creative expression. To
date, I have found little research and descriptive literature that has described the everyday experience of engaging in creative expression, particularly within open creative expressive programs and offerings. I will continue, now, to review the counselling practice literature that includes creative expression.

Creative Expression Within Counselling Practice

The reflective practice literature primarily describes clients' experiences of engaging in creative expression from the perspective of the therapist. True to the therapist perspective, this literature commonly describes the therapist directing or guiding the client to engage in creative expression in a particular way, for example to draw his or her emotions. Beyond the notion of developing creative expressive programs, creative expression as a counselling approach is increasingly, though slowly becoming part of psychotherapy in inpatient and outpatient settings and in private practice.

A range of significant life events, such as serious illness, physical and sexual abuse, family turmoil, and change in family structure are described in the reflective practice literature as being positively affected by people's engagement in creative expression (Allan, 1988; Allan & Bertoia, 1992; Furth, 1988). This literature is mainly from the counselling and psychology disciplines, and includes a discussion of the Jungian approach in analysis of the products of creative expression. The reflective practice literature indicates that creative expression is used as a means to an end—a means to analyze people's responses to their significant life events. People's progress in coping with significant life events is shown in the products of their creative expression. Although spontaneous drawings are often promoted, the
setting is usually within the counselling milieu (Allan, 1988). Occasionally, a client brings artwork into the session that was completed at home. The emphasis in this literature is the authors' and other therapists' descriptions of clients' accounts of their significant life events as depicted in art (Furth, 1988), the use of art in school group counselling programs (Allan & Bertoia, 1992), or a discussion of themes that arise from Jungian analyses of people's creative expression (Allan, 1988).

The reflective practice literature that does not include the Jungian influence, suggests that creative expression, such as puppetry, drama, music, and drawing, when included in counselling, promotes an enjoyable and relaxed environment while expanding people's knowledge of their external world and internal self (Gladding, 1998; France & Allen, 1997; Rossiter, 1992). In particular, France and Allen (1997) described the use of the Gestalt approach together with directing clients to draw. They acknowledge the value of creative expression in assisting the client to express emotions. However, they indicate that "the counsellor has to structure the experience in order for the client to derive meaning from the activity" (France & Allen, p. 24). Rossiter (1992) describes the value of the creative art therapist's role in guiding clients in their creative expression. In art therapy and in the general field of counselling, this directive view is upheld in much of the quantitative research and descriptive literature, although it is not prevalent in the qualitative research.

Levy (1988) expresses the notion that there exists a gap between the body and the mind, specifically between movement, and thinking and feeling. The author describes the value of psychodynamic movement as a way to express emotions and, thus, reduce tension and effectively deal with emotions. Psychodynamic
movement and creative expression are the means described by Levy by which a movement therapist guides a client to express his or her emotions in order to achieve healing and growth. Levy explains that it is the depth of the connection between the therapist and the client, together with the creative process, that lead a client toward healing and growth.

Covington and Crosby (1997) describe music therapy as a valuable nursing intervention that promotes exploration and expression of feelings so therapy might be focused upon specific issues raised by the music experience. Hamer (1991) indicates that music therapy is a directive nursing intervention to change or reinforce clients' behaviours. The healing effect of using a directive approach in promoting people's engagement in creative expression within counselling is described by Glaister (1994) and Glaister and McGuinness (1992). Alternatives to the directive approach previously noted are, for example, the role of music in spiritual care described by Folta (1993), whereby people experience healing responses by engaging in singing or by listening to music. Folta indicates that caregivers may have been the ones to choose the music to effect a response in clients; however, clients also had opportunities to choose the music.

The reflective practice literature shows that approaches to creative expression within counselling range from structuring the creative expression and analyzing the products of creative expression, to being open to clients' choices of creative expression. This literature described a range of creative experiences, such as bibliotherapy, drawings, puppetry, drama, music, and movement that are positively received by clients and, in some cases personally chosen by clients.
Discussion of the experience of engaging in creative expression seldom appeared in the research or reflective practice literature. Literature that describes creative expression within counselling practice commonly describes the value of therapists guiding clients during the creative process. Given that much of the qualitative research shows that when people are free to choose their modes and means of creative expression, they are able to deal with their emotional pain (e.g., Rockwood, 1999), a question then emerges—what significance exists in clients’ everyday engagement in creative expression without direction by a therapist? The everyday experience of creative expression within the counselling literature bears further examination as it relates to people’s significant life events. In the next section, I will review the practice and self-help literature that begins to illuminate this everyday experience. Nondirected, everyday creative expression is the focus of this present study.

Descriptive Literature

There is a third body of literature that is descriptive in nature and is found in practice and self-help literature. The focus of this descriptive literature is the author’s or other people’s experiences of engaging in creative expression. Much of the self-help literature focuses on women’s rather than men’s everyday engagement in creative expression.

Practice Literature

Numerous authors (Allen, 1986; Appleton & Dykman, 1996; Bowers, 1992; Hines-Martin & Ising, 1993) indicate that the products of people’s creative expression reflect their internal processes and/or social worlds and, as such, are
symbolic vehicles for people to deal with their significant life events. For instance, Petzold (1982) included excerpts of dialogue of a 36-year-old man’s experience of engaging in creative expression during the course of dying from cancer. This person described drawing as a means for him to draw the pain out of himself. Appleton and Dykeman (1996) described a school counselling program for a group of Native American boys and girls where their art became the vehicle for them to experience improved personal and social functioning. Bowers (1992) described a case study of a 24-year-old woman’s drawings within therapy for childhood sexual abuse. It is Bower’s contention that the drawings were a safe way for the woman to be in control of her memories and to get a distance from those memories. These last two studies describe counsellor-directed creative expression. As a whole, descriptive literature of this type gives only a glimpse of the meaning of clients’ engagement in creative expression.

Although Carlson (1997) does not expand on clients’ personal meanings of their creative experiences, he suggests that art and narrative therapy each bring out aspects of the self that are hidden to a person or to others in his or her world. Both art and narrative therapy are ways to externalize the problem; however, Carlson cautions that the products of art (e.g., drawings) cannot necessarily be interpreted as indicating that the problem has been externalized. Drawings may reflect an internal view of the problem; in other words, they may keep the problem inside oneself. As with previous authors, Carlson describes the directive role of the therapist, for example asking a 14-year-old female client to draw a self-portrait of her relationship to anger.
Congdon (1990) describes the importance of promoting art therapy that is an everyday interaction with various creative expressive mediums and engagement in the creative expressive process. Congdon referred to everyday creative expression within art therapy as being normalized because both healthy people and those with problems or difficulties benefit from the art therapy approach. Art-making is important to people in general because, according to Erickson (as cited in Congdon, 1990), “the laws of the media themselves...teach you unfailingly to know yourself and free you to be yourself and to grow” (p. 19). Congdon further indicates that creative expression can be a strong influence on a person’s ability to establish his or her sense of personal and/or cultural identity in order to promote health. As with previously reviewed literature, engaging in creative expression within counselling is described by Congdon as positively affecting a person’s view of self which, in turn, promotes one’s health. Although this descriptive practice literature made reference to everyday creative expression, people’s experiences of engaging in creative expression were described from Congdon’s point of view.

Estep (1995) describes a case study of a 28-year-old woman. During art therapy, she engaged in creative expression within the context of gaining distance from her experience of incest. This case study is described from Estep’s perspective rather than from the woman’s perspective of her experience of engaging in creative expression. Within art therapy this woman primarily established the therapeutic direction of her therapy and, as a result, she was able to disclose and she experienced “self-soothing” (Estep, p. 9). The notion that she could achieve self-comfort points to the possibility that by engaging in creative expression, people
can gain control of their emotions related to their significant life events. This concept is important because, if people can gain control of their emotions, the possibility also exists that they can come to terms with their significant life events on their own and in an everyday sense. In addition to the social responsibility of dealing with significant life events such as incest, and the responsibility of therapists to assist victims of, for example incest, to distance themselves from their memories, authors such as Congdon (1990) and Estep (1995) point out the value of personally experiencing the creative process. The descriptive literature brings to light the possibility that people can regain health by engaging in creative expression that is separate from psychotherapy.

Self-help literature. There are many self-help books written by counsellors, art therapists, and creative expressive professionals. These books can be used as a personal guide by nonprofessional men and women, and by therapists or other health professionals. The books are often written in an objective manner, telling people how to engage in creative expression. Few of these books are written in a dynamic way, inviting people to be open to the creative expressive experience. Typically, the authors focus on how to use a variety of forms of creative expression (e.g., painting and writing) to promote self healing. Some of this self-help literature includes examples of the authors’ or others’ experiences with creative expression and the positive impact of engaging in creative expression to deal with their significant life events. This self-help literature includes a few descriptions of women’s in-depth experiences of engaging in creative expression (e.g., Schiwy, 1996). However, most of the literature describes useful creative expressive
materials and approaches and leaves out a discussion of men's or women's experiences with creative expression.

Men's experiences of engaging in creative expression are primarily found in research and descriptive accounts of the experiences of groups of men and women. Women's experiences are mainly described in self-help books that include personal accounts (Allen, 1995; DeSalvo, 1999; Schiwy, 1996). Merriam (1998) describes women's experiences of engaging in creative expression while in prison, as a way for them to find their voices after years of severe trauma that occurred before their incarceration. What is not apparent in Merriam's description is what it means for these women to find their voices. Although these personal accounts and self-help books are not research-based, they present notions that inform this present research and help illuminate the powerful connection between everyday creative expression and significant life events for women.

Creative expression and significant life events. Some descriptive literature describes, from a general healthcare perspective, the experience of creative expression within specific significant life events. Bailey (1997) explains that the arts play an integral role in the life of a person with cancer. According to Bailey, the role played by art includes (a) promoting reflections and expressions of one's environment, (b) meeting one's basic creative needs in relation to emotions and spirituality, including giving to others and being remembered, (c) finding meaning within spiritual connections, (d) experiencing a sense of joy, and (e) making links between people of varied backgrounds. Even though this is not a research article, it spoke to the notion in the present research of discovering meaning that already
exists versus making new meaning. Bailey expands the notion of discovery of meaning to include enhancing one's wholeness through engaging in creative expression and thereby becoming grounded. This article describes a description of the possibility, for people, of shifting the caring perspective from being cared for, to caring for others as a result of the products of their creative expression.

Torrance (1986) adds to the descriptive literature, by showing the connection between creative expression and intense emotional experiences. The author describes the everyday experiences of adults and of a child, of responding to the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy by engaging in creative expression. He shows the power of creative expression and describes images emerging without the direction of the artist. Torrance describes people's experiences of relief from expressing themselves creatively, and the new perspective they achieved regarding their losses. Torrance's description illuminates the intensity and value of the creative process and the experience of everyday creative expression.

Open studio approach. The descriptive literature includes books and articles on the creative expressive experience that happens in therapeutic studio settings (Adamson, 1990; Allen, 1995; Kivnick & Erikson, 1983). In other words, the everyday experience of creative expression occurs within settings that contain supplies for creative expression and where there are people who have knowledge of ways to utilize the resources, not in a directive manner but in a facilitative way. These books and articles are descriptions of other's experiences with creative expression, omitting people's personal accounts of their experiences of engaging in creative expression. However, this literature highlights the idea that providing an
open studio space for creative expression, free from analysis and counselling, is an important way to respect people's unique experiences and to facilitate rather than direct people's creative expression.

Psychotherapy approaches range from confrontational approaches to those that are open to client direction and control. However, psychotherapy by its very nature retains therapist influence even in the sense of the therapist choosing and responding from a particular therapeutic stance. Allen's (1995) descriptive article questions the notion of combining psychotherapy with providing an open studio space for engaging in creative expression. Allen proposes the open studio model that fully promotes clients' control of creative expression and of creative expressive experiences. In this model, therapists' involvement is such that they invite rather than direct or influence people's creative expressive experiences. Allen argues that art therapy, as a type of psychotherapy, with its specific rules and regulations literally curtails the effectiveness of creative expression. Allen focuses on the free expression of creative expressive images within the open studio, on promoting trust in the images as they develop, and on the effectiveness of the product in influencing peoples' views of themselves.

Erikson (1979) promotes the healing nature of the art experience. Erikson's keynote address to 1500 art therapists noted that engaging with the art materials can, in itself, be a powerful healer without being connected to therapy. Erikson spoke to the importance of the art being honoured in and of itself without being drawn into verbal interpretation. This address points toward the importance of everyday creative expression. Erikson said that when people can achieve distance
and control over their feelings by creating products that reflect themselves, they experience healing. By engaging in creative expression in an everyday sense, people have the potential to heal themselves.

Although the descriptive practice literature is permeated with directive approaches within creative expression, there is an abundance of this practice literature that illustrates aspects of the notion of everyday creative expression. Some of this literature includes ways for counsellors and people in general to engage in creative expression. Beyond these how-to methods are aspects of women’s personal experiences of engaging in creative expression as they gain control of their emotions and of their lives. Some descriptions advocate for freely creating in an open studio without psychotherapy.

**Self-Reflective Literature**

In contrast to the descriptive practice literature, the self-reflective literature includes various descriptions of people’s personal experiences with creative expression, such as anecdotal descriptions of their creative expressive experiences within specific significant life events. Many people have written about experiencing a release of their innermost thoughts and emotions by engaging in creative expression. These descriptions are dynamic because they are subjective descriptions of people’s experiences. For example, Berstein (1995) recounts how creative expression helped her endure the pain of endometriosis. Crawford (1991) describes the transformative effect of creative expression on herself and the power of creative expression to enable her to survive her journey to heal from cancer, specifically Hodgkins Disease. Langer (1989) describes two women’s experiences
of creating art within the context of dealing with cancer. These women portray their art-making as their way to achieve a sense of resolution regarding their experiences with cancer and to help them affirm that they are still alive.

Smith (1995) describes a woman’s creative expressive experience and struggle to deal with cancer. This woman engages in art-making to restructure her world. Underwood (1997) describes Gazale-Lowe, an art therapist, as saying that creative expression is a way to restore order out of chaos and in essence is recovery of wellness. Underwood does not indicate whether Gazale-Lowe is referring to men or to women. There is minimal discussion in the descriptive self-reflective literature and no research that I located on the potential of people to maintain wellness by engaging in creative expression. However, the few articles I located on this topic point toward wellness being a factor within creative expression and within the concept of community.

Within the self-reflective literature are anecdotal accounts of the notion of community and its place within the creative expressive experience. Cooper and Buford (1977) describe the effect on women of gathering as a group to quilt. The quilts themselves are shown as being a reflection of love for others and as a reflection of the world. Coming together as a group, to quilt, brings the women together to interact as a community of women.

The self-reflective literature includes descriptions of connections between people across cultures. These connections are another result of engaging in creative expression (Bailey, 1997). Sometimes, these connections are bridges between people. Anderson and Gold (1998) describe the experience of one woman
in a group of Native Canadians who shared her story of a personal symbol. Her symbol was relevant to another group member and it appeared later in that other person’s painting. Creative expression is described as building community with people as they share pleasures and pain through their creations (Binet, 1994). This self-reflective literature shows the everyday experience of engaging in creative expression in community and a link between this experience and maintaining wellness.

Bailey’s (1997), Anderson and Gold’s (1998), and Binet’s (1994) descriptions were not intended to illuminate the meaning of experiences; however, the authors briefly describe the experiences of people and their significant life events. A common thread between these descriptions is a link between the people whose experiences are being described, and the communities of people who share similar experiences. This link points out the shared experiences of everyday creative expression and significant life events, and points toward the possibility of the shared meaning of experiences.

Although the descriptive literature is missing a research perspective, this literature illuminates the understanding of women’s everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression on their own and in community with others. The literature points toward the notion that without creative expression, these women could not have survived their significant life events or at least could not have experienced health and wellness within the context of their significant life events.
Wellness Literature

Some practice literature brings to light the notion that creative expression can promote wellness throughout a person's life. Maintaining wellness is considered to be in contrast to achieving health following an illness or psychological difficulty in a person's life. The concept of wellness includes the notion of survival.

Rose (1991) describes a sense of wholeness that comes from highlighting a person's experiences through creative expression. Duncan (1987) argues that creativity plays a major role in mental wellness and therefore it is important that creative expression, in its broadest sense, be valued in society beginning in childhood. Wellness, here, contains the notion of possibilities. Creative expression is a way to create images of the future beyond the immediate significant life event (Goff & Torrance, 1991). From Irwin's (1984) perspective, art is a way to connect experiencing with knowing. Although both the concepts of meaning making and discovery of meaning are expressed by Irwin, the author does not clearly distinguish between the two, and does not clearly relate the two ideas to the concept of knowing.

Grossman (1981) comments that creativity may be human beings' means of survival given that even, prehistorically, people re-experienced their emotions as expressed in cave art and in order to restructure their universe. Grossman identifies another historic example on the occasion of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who through their art found meaning in their lives and a way to survive. McNiff (1992) goes one step further than Grossman's (1981) notion of survival and argues that the notion of the self dissipates through the creative expressive process before
becoming a new state of being. A new state of being, potentially fits with Clark's (1999) and Rockwood's (1999) studies in that, as I noted earlier in this chapter, both reveal the experience of a veil that people move beyond to gain a new perspective of themselves. Clark (1999), Grossman (1981), McNiff, (1992), and Rockwood (1999) have found that people experience positive life changes, and that they experience being and becoming new people through their very engagement in the creative expressive process and through their relationship with the products of their creative expression.

Some descriptive practice literature not only points toward the concept that creative expression promotes wellness throughout a person's life, but also toward the idea that creative expression is a catalyst for people's survival from significant life events. Some literature describes a new self-perspective that emerges from the creative expressive process.

Conclusion

Much of the literature that I reviewed was non-research personal accounts of engaging in creative expression. At times, this descriptive literature came close to portraying people's subjective experiences and the effect of creative expression on their significant life events. The meaningfulness of these experiences, for the individual, was partially revealed. Another large section of the literature included health professionals' descriptions of creative expressive programs and/or of their work with clients who were engaging in creative expression. This descriptive practice literature omitted descriptions of the clients' experiences as told from the clients' perspectives. The counselling literature frequently described the therapist
influencing or directing the creative expressive experience. Very little literature addressed the everyday experience of engaging in creative expression. However, when the descriptive practice literature did speak to the value of the everyday experience of engaging in creative expression, the authors pointed toward a connection between creative expression and healing, and between creative expression and being and becoming a new person.

Descriptive self-reflective and practice literature highlighted the notion of survival and wellness as integral aspects of the creative process. There was an extensive body of literature describing the relationship between creative expression and healing, and much of this literature was based on research. However, there was limited qualitative research on the topic of people's experiences of engaging in creative expression. The few qualitative studies highlighted people's experiences of engaging in creative expression but, at the same time, revealed a gap in the literature about what it means for women to engage in everyday creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events.
CHAPTER 3

Research Approach

In this chapter I discuss the philosophical basis of hermeneutic phenomenology. I show how I applied this research approach to this study. As well, I describe the methodology that I employed and explain the process of interpretation that I undertook throughout this research.

Historical Approach

According to van Manen (1997) "phenomenology . . . is the descriptive study of lived experience (phenomena) in the attempt to enrich lived experience by mining its meaning" (p. 38). It is a striving to capture, in writing, the uniqueness of an experience in everyday life. "Hermeneutics . . . is the interpretive study of the expressions and objectifications (texts) of lived experience in the attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them" (van Manen, p. 38). Van Manen explains that research can be pure phenomenology, pure hermeneutics, or a blend of the two research approaches. Together, hermeneutic phenomenology is a research approach that yields an interpretive description of everyday lived experiences, a search for the meaning of human "being." In this study, I was searching to understand the women's experiences of engaging in creative expression. As I listened to the taped interviews, read and re-read the transcripts, and wrote and re-wrote about the interviews, my writing came as close as possible to a re-living of what it means to engage in creative expression within the context of significant life events (Rockwood, 1999). The research question for this study (What does it mean for women to engage in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful
significant life events?) focuses on the lifeworld that is lived in an everyday sense, not necessarily every day, but rather in the commonplace colloquial sense of the word.

The approach of this study follows Heidegger’s (1953/1996) and Gadamer’s (1960/1998) thinking and it has understanding as its base. In particular, this study focuses on Heidegger’s notion of understanding beyond what conscious subjects interpret from independent objects (Magee, 1987). In other words, the focus is understanding the essence of the women’s experiences beyond their descriptions of their experiences. This research approach brings to light meaning that is initially hidden from the participants and from me (Palmer, 1969).

“Phenomenology is the study of essences” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. vii). The meaning of the lived experience at the core of the research question is an understanding of the essence of that experience. Van Manen (1997) stated, “essence is that what makes a thing what it is . . . rather than its being or becoming something else” (p. 177). In this research, I have searched for the deep significance of the meaning of the lived experience of engaging in creative expression. Gadamer (as cited in Davi, 1987) stated that from a hermeneutic perspective “when I see something new [in a work of art], it opens up my eyes, both with respect to what I have already seen and with respect to what I will see later” (p. 80). He was referring, here, to the discovery of the essence of the work of art that yields something yet unseen. It is not that the essence cannot be seen, but rather that it is yet to be seen. Gadamer (1960/1998) speaks of this seeing in terms of horizons. These possibilities
are a reflection of past, present, and future understandings and these understandings are a fusion of all three horizons.

According to Gadamer (1977/1986) there exist “two different senses of interpretation: pointing to something and pointing out the meaning of something” (p. 68). Gadamer described the latter interpretation as "relat[ing] back to the kind of sign that interprets itself" (p. 68). The research question for this study asked for an interpretation of what something means which fits with Gadamer's second sense of interpretation. To interpret the meaning of the lived experiences of people requires that I understand their pre-reflective experiences from their reflective perspectives. "A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience" (van Manen, 1997, p. 10). Therefore the reflective stories of people's experiences reveal their pre-reflective experiences. I reflexively involve my whole self in understanding the lived experience expressed in the research question (Van Manen).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an approach that derives understanding of experience from a place that exists prior to analysis of what it means, in this case, to engage in creative expression. Davi (1987), in describing hermeneutics from Gadamer's perspective stated that it is "clear that no hermeneutical approach is possible if the viewer isn't already in possession of a kind of pre-understanding" (p. 78). As the viewer of the experience of engaging in creative expression, I brought my personal understanding and experience into my interpretive stance.

The basis of interpretation is understanding rather than the other way around (Dreyfus, 1994; MacLeod, 1996). Heidegger, (1953/1996) identified three aspects of
understanding that ground interpretation: fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. Fore-having refers to my biases and past experiences that could affect my interpretations. Fore-sight is the point of view from which I interpret the data in this study. Fore-conception is my expectation of how the data may show itself for interpretation (Plager, 1994).

Gadamer (1960/1998) explained that “the important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings” (p. 269). It is not that I can or should ignore or eliminate pre-judgments; rather it is important that I question them in light of the object being studied and at the same time “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text” (Gadamer, p. 269). Throughout this research process I have needed to be open to question and it was equally important that I have been open to reflect. Those two notions are related within this research approach. I will discuss them in more detail later in this chapter.

Heidegger’s hermeneutic focus is the study of human activities and of human being (Dreyfus, 1994; Plager, 1994). He purposefully opposed Husserl’s notion of intentionality that included the human activity of consciously focusing upon objects. Heidegger, instead, contended that our involvement in the world is being there (Dasein) and this being (Dasein) is understood rather than explained (Dreyfus, 1994). Dasein is our being in the world that already exists and that is transparent to us. In this study, interpretation is a reflection of the lifeworlds of the participants and of me and, ultimately, is an understanding of possibilities within our shared world. As I noted in Chapter 2, many of the descriptions in the research and counselling
literature are static rather than dynamic, omitting the essence of women's lived experiences. However, much of the non-research personal accounts illuminated the meaning of women's experiences. By engaging in hermeneutic phenomenology, this research seeks to fill in this gap in the research literature.

From a hermeneutic perspective, subjectivity and objectivity are not understood in the usual way of a separation of the two. They are, instead, understood as being interconnected. "'Objectivity' means that the researcher is oriented to the object, that which stands in front of him or her" (van Manen, 1997, p. 20). My task was, as van Manen (1984) stated, "to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of . . . [the] human experience" (p. 7) of engaging in creative expression within the context of a significant life event. At the same time, "subjectivity" played a key role. "Subjectivity means that we are strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way" (van Manen, 1997, p. 20). In this research I am not co-constructing meaning with the participants, but rather we are coming to know the object of their experiences in an intersubjective way. Together, we are coming to understand the meaning of our shared experiences, meaning that already exists.

**Methodology**

Six people volunteered to participate in this study after they heard about this research from people in the community. Initially, I interviewed each participant once by following a set of guiding questions that we discussed in a conversational manner. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed. By listening to the tapes and reading and re-reading the transcripts, and by writing and re-writing, I analyzed
and interpreted the data. My understanding of the women's experiences deepened when I engaged in my own creative expression. When I determined that my interpretation was complete, I asked for feedback from each of the participants. I told the women's stories of engaging in creative expression in a collective story of their individual experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology guided the approach to the research design.

**Participant Selection**

The design for this study includes identifying, by way of the snowball approach, six adults who had engaged in creative expression during and after their significant life events. Any creative activity, for example weaving, dancing, writing poetry, or gardening, was acceptable in this study. The quality of the creative products was not important, rather the emphasis was on the participants' experiences of engaging in creative expression. For this study, the significant life event was whatever each person considered to be of special importance to him or her, for example, the birth of a child, an illness, marriage, or divorce. The significant life event was to have occurred within the past five years and the participants were not to be currently involved in psychotherapy.

I discussed my study with and sent 36 follow-up letters to colleagues and acquaintances (see Appendix A for the letter to colleagues and acquaintances). I requested that they contact people whom they knew had engaged in creative expression during significant life experiences within the past five years and to ask those people interested in participating in this study to contact me directly. I chose five years because people who have engaged in creative expression during a
significant life event have informally described to me aspects of their experiences that occurred within the past five years. Their memories remain vivid to them. Also, my experience that I previously described and that occurred within the past five years remains a powerful memory for me. Many of the colleagues and acquaintances with whom I spoke indicated that they knew men and women who had engaged in creative expression within happy times and within difficulties in their lives. Six women in their early 30’s to late 40’s contacted me to volunteer for this study and I included all of these women in the study. One woman is single and the other five women live in partner relationships. All but two women have children. The participants came from a northern community, from home settings rather than from counselling settings or institutions, and they expressed an interest in reflecting on their experience of engaging in creative expression. In Chapter 2, I describe their individual profiles.

All the women identified significant life events that occurred in the past five years. In addition, all the women reflected on more than the one significant life event that they had originally identified, and some of the additional significant life events occurred more than five years ago. To the women in this study, those additional events were not only relevant, but also important in contributing to the answer to the research question.

Ethical Considerations

I requested that each woman read and sign a consent form before participating in this study (see Appendix B for the informed consent). I anticipated that participation in this research might elicit memories and/or emotional difficulties
for which any one of these people might want to seek psychotherapy. Prior to conducting research interviews, I identified five therapists who would be interested in and available to the participants and I gave this information to each of the women in this study (see Appendix C for information about therapists). I left it to each participant to decide on her need for psychotherapy. The women have not told me whether or not they have contacted any of the identified counsellors, or any other counsellor, for psychotherapy in relation to the impact of this research.

Confidentiality was adhered to throughout this research. All transcripts have consistently been kept in a locked case. Pseudonyms have been used throughout my writing and identifiable information, for example names of family members, have been altered unless the women requested that I include that information. I did not send the three findings chapters to any of the women to read and comment upon, until I received permission to do so from my thesis supervisor, and until I had received verbal consent from each of the participants regarding the other participants' reading of their experiences.

Interview Process

I interviewed each participant once in their homes or in my home or office, using a standard set of guiding questions (see Appendix D for the interview questions). Those interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted about one and one-half hours and was conversational. I kept myself "and the interviewee oriented to the substance of the thing being questioned" (van Manen, 1997, p. 98). My intent was not, merely, to ask questions and expect answers, but rather to ask questions that could lead to other questions, all
promoting reflection by the women and by me. For example, as the interviewer, I clarified my understanding of the participants' responses and asked additional questions, to promote reflection by the participants. At the time of the interview, I did not speculate aloud about meanings or interpretations, nor did I share examples from my own experiences. During the interview most the women showed me some of their products of creative expression and talked about those products and the process of creating them. My approach throughout this research has been open to the way that best allows women's everyday, taken-for-granted experiences to reveal themselves.

**Process of Analysis and Interpretation**

During the interviews, I listened carefully to the women's experiential descriptions, to their life stories of engaging in creative expression within the context of their personal significant life events. Then, I listened to each tape, once, from beginning to end and to parts of each tape, a few times, in order to become attuned to the way the women described their experiences. The emphasis they placed on certain words and phrases often pointed to deeper meanings or to experiences that were particularly salient for individuals. As I dwelled in their stories I became more deeply connected with the research question, their stories, and my own experiences with creative expression. Over time, I joined the women in hearing and telling (through writing and re-writing) a collective story (Rockwood, 1999) reflective of the women's individual experiences. When I completed my interpretations of the data, I asked for feedback from the six women on all three findings chapters.
Throughout data analysis (Chapters 4, 5, and 6), I suspended my reading of the literature in order to keep my work focused on the transcripts and reduce the chance of conducting acontextual analysis. In other words, I reduced the chance of my analysis being reflective of the literature, rather than of the women's experiences. According to van Manen (1997) "it is sound practice to attempt to address the phenomenological meaning of a phenomenon on one's own first" (p. 76). All the while, I remained cognizant of the potential impact, on my analysis, of the literature I had read while preparing my thesis proposal. I moved back and forth from the parts of the data to the whole by reading the transcripts; reflecting on my experiences with creative expression; and thinking about, questioning, and considering the literature I had previously read while preparing my thesis proposal. Once I had completed data analysis, I returned to reading the literature. "In this way the work of others turns into a conversational partnership that reveals the limits and possibilities of one's own interpretive achievements" (van Manen, p. 76). I wrote and re-wrote in order to reflect on the women's lived experiences, together with my experiences and those described in the literature. My aim was to reveal the taken-for-granted meaning of the women's creative expressive experiences.

Because van Manen (1997) had identified the common existentials of lived time, lived space, lived body, and lived relationships, I began my analysis by reviewing each transcript from the perspective of those existentials. I highlighted common words and phrases that related to the existentials and I began writing and re-writing about the women's and my own experiences within each of the common existentials. As an example, for lived body and lived space, I identified that the
women commonly experienced “losing” themselves during the creative expressive process. All the while, I journaled and made notes of questions and of thoughts that came to my mind about the data. I attended to the women's language, what they said and how they said it, and their taken-for-granted messages, in other words what the women did not say. As themes emerged and I wrote about these themes, I questioned why certain aspects of themes might be missing or why some themes might be missing for some but not for all the women. Gradually, and the more I wrote and re-wrote, I moved to a deeper understanding of the themes by eliminating duplication of themes and bringing to light the women's stories of their lived experiences. The following analytical questions kept my perspective focused on the essence of the women's experiences and on the influence of my pre-understandings. The questions were:

1) What is happening to the self during creative expression?
2) What are the creative practices undertaken without thought?
3) What is it like to be in the creative world?
4) What are the relational issues between a woman and her expression?
5) How do my background meanings and pre-understandings affect my understanding and interpretation?

Whenever I wrote or reviewed the data, these questions became my guide in order for me to move deeper within interpretation. Throughout ongoing data analysis and interpretation, these questions varied in the way in which I responded to them. For example, I was continually asking myself about the influence of my own
background and pre-understandings. However, I found it easiest to answer the first question about the self after I had completed a section or two of writing, in order to have my writing upon which to reflect. At all times, the analytical questions kept my thinking focused on my overall research question.

In addition to using reflective writing methods to further the interpretive process, I deepened my understanding by engaging in creative expression. Up to this point, I had suspended my creative activities except for the writing I was doing for this thesis. Because my energies were focused on thesis work, I had been fighting the urge to embroider, paint, or draw with pastels. I began to notice an intense desire to return to my own creative expression, so I decided to take up my embroidery, again. After a short time of being present with the wool with which I was embroidering, I allowed the wool to fall in various shapes. One shape resembled a silhouette of me. This experience was emotional for me because I could both see and feel myself in this silhouette. I discovered that I was not just experiencing the significant life event of my thesis but that my life is intertwined with my thesis and that my life and thesis are a whole.

When I returned to embroidery, I returned to journalling about my own creative expressive experience related to each theme I had identified to this point. This personal experience helped me to think beyond the beginning themes related to the women’s experiences. Before continuing to write, I needed some way of making sense of all that was rushing toward me, so I drew. I used pastels and drew the data that was present to me. It was then that I knew of a greater depth of understanding that I was trying to achieve. I wrote about this new-found depth but it
still did not seem alive until a poem emerged with great haste and insistence. This poem appears at the beginning of Chapter 4. It is as if I was experiencing cycles of creative expression that fit best at certain times. For example, I embroidered before gathering data, I wrote with a pencil during data analysis, I created my embroidered profile and wrote with a coloured pen to bring my personal experiences alive, and I wrote a poem as a way to begin a more in-depth written analysis.

Experiencing my own creative expression made it easier for me to identify themes that represented the women’s experiences. By reviewing, documenting, and highlighting key words and phrases in the transcripts, I searched for themes that represented structures of experiences, in other words the themes that yield the experiences (van Manen, 1997). Words and phrases that were commonly used by the women pointed to certain themes. For example, the theme, “lifelines within the journeys,” emerged when the women were referring to their creative expression as a lifeline, and to their emotional survival being linked to the creative process. Other themes came to the fore in singular examples that connoted emotional experiences for the women. For example, the theme “defining moments,” was expressed by each of the women. They described the moments when they came to know that their creative expression was integral to their survival. Sometimes themes were kernels of experience that were barely perceptible in a woman’s story, yet, upon ongoing analysis of those kernels viewed together, the themes emerged as an important part of the whole. For example, themes emerged about transition and change that resulted from creative expression, however, viewed together, those themes illuminated the larger theme, the “rebirth of self.” According to van Manen, a
thematic analysis involves asking "what statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described" (p. 93). I identified initial themes that fit for the participants in the research in order to express the unique structures of the women's experiences.

The poem at the beginning of Chapter 4 reflects themes that were beginning to appear in the data. As the themes gained clarity, they formed the basis for Chapters 4, 5, and 6. In addition to writing about those key themes, I asked for feedback on the poem from a variety of women who engage in creative expression, about whether or not it spoke to their experiences. Since the poem emerged from the experiences of the research participants, I wanted to know if other women could also identify with the poem's message. Without exception, each woman who read the poem confirmed that it spoke to their experiences of engaging in creative expression within significant life events. In one situation, the poem was the catalyst for an hour-long discussion by a group of women of how women's roles alter and often diminish their creative expressive journeys. In another situation, a woman silently cried as she read the poem; it spoke to her in a profoundly deep way.

The six women in this study described uniquely different experiences. "Sometimes, participants will share common, but not all, aspects of a phenomenologically derived structure" (Osborne, 1990, p. 86). This shared structure and my own clarity that emerged through my writing is the clearing referred to by Heidegger (Benner, 1994; van Manen, 1997). It is not a search for facts. The entire process was a means of making sense and a bringing to light, meaning that was initially obscure.
While I wrote and rewrote my way to describing and interpreting the essence of my research question, I kept a separate journal of process notes that included my work to determine essential themes, my thoughts about the research process, changes in my approach, and insights gleaned through observation and discussion. All the while my reflection and writing moved me closer to a level of meaning that was deeper than mere linguistic structures (Osborne, 1990).

Although I had asked the women to speak about their significant life events that had occurred within the past five years, the participants spoke, in addition, of a range of events that in some case extended back to their childhoods. The women linked their distant events to their experiences of creative expression and significant life events that occurred within the past five years. To bring to light the essence of the women's experiences, I read and re-read the transcripts and wrote and re-wrote about their experiences. By engaging in my own creative expressive journey at various times throughout my thesis writing, windows opened for me to see the shared world view of women's experiences of engaging in creative expression.

To ensure that my interpretation was focused on the research question and resonated with the women, I asked for feedback from the six participants on the draft findings chapters, Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The feedback was in the form of face-to-face or telephone conversations and notes that the women made for my use. The women reviewed their own and the other women's expressions of their experiences. Then they gave feedback to me on my interpretations of their experiences. The women noted resonance with aspects of the others' experiences and, in many cases, they responded with a resounding “Yes!” to the fit of the
interpretations with their experiences. The women had few suggestions for change, for example to correct a child's age and to adjust the wording of a few sentences.

Hermeneutics is coming to an understanding of something that is initially incomprehensible and foreign (Gadamer, 1977/1986). In his conversation with Davi (1987), Gadamer explained, "there's an art of reading in hermeneutical procedure, since it's the reading procedure that allows us to give voice to signs that don't speak on their own" (p. 78). My reading of the transcripts and of my own writing, the process of my writing and re-writing, and my listening to feedback from the women in this study, were ways for the women's experiences to be revealed and for me to give voice to my perceptions of the women's experiences.

The "text is not the sole object of interpretation but, rather, the inner violence and struggle which were at work in the creation of the text" (Palmer, 1969, p. 147). My struggle to understand the research question became a part of the interpretation and a part of the text as did the interpretation, itself, that broke past surface understandings. Continuous reflection was critically important in my research. My perception, insight, and discernment needed to be fine-tuned and I needed to be fully oriented to my question avoiding superficial interpretation or unreflected pre-judgments (van Manen, 1997). As I wrote and re-wrote my way to describing and interpreting the nature of the lived experience of my question, I moved closer and closer to identifying how it is for the women in this study to engage in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events. I needed to become oriented to the question in such a way that I lived the question, that I became the question (van Manen, 1984). In so doing, I was better able to
communicate what I saw just as participants in my study communicated what they saw.

The hermeneutic process involves moving in a circular fashion. Leonard (1994) states it is “circular, moving back and forth between the parts and whole and between the initial forestructure and what is being revealed in the data of the inquiry” (p. 57). The understanding achieved through progressively deeper analysis allowed me to “examine the parts of the whole, and then [to] re-examine the whole in light of the insight...gained from the parts” (Leonard, p. 57).

Heidegger called this circular movement, the hermeneutic circle. "In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing" (Heidegger, 1992, p. 226). Heidegger referred to this clarity of knowing as reaching a clearing where suddenly the meaning of the experience is clearly present (van Manen, 1997; Benner, 1994). This clearing is a disclosure of our shared world through which our interpretations are possible (Dreyfus, 1994; Plager, 1994). The concept of a clearing, in this research, was reached when beginning themes evolved into new themes during the process of writing and re-writing, in order to achieve a place of deeper understanding. There was definite movement and elusiveness in trying to understand the nature of the experience. In keeping with being in the hermeneutic circle, once I had completed my analysis of the transcripts, I returned to the literature and found key links particularly between Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s work and the essence of engaging in creative expression within the context of significant life events. This return to the literature along with ongoing writing and re-writing to gain a deeper understanding of the experience of creative expression, represents
the hermeneutic circle. It is here that the meaning of the research question became clear and that the movement, reflective of the elusive nature of this question, stilled.

Although the aim of this study is to show the nature of the experience of engaging in creative expression within the context of significant life events, the results are not representative of the complexities of life (van Manen, 1997). Instead, the results show an aspect of this experience. The results of this research can not be generalized to every person because the results of each hermeneutic phenomenological study are unique to the participants and researcher of each study (van Manen, 1997; Rockwood, 1999). This study adds to the understanding of the lived experiences of others, to ultimately reveal shared meaning.

Conclusion

This research is focused upon the experiences of six women who have engaged in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events. Hermeneutic phenomenology is the guiding approach of this research. The interconnection between the participants' experiences with creative expression, my own experiences, and experiences described in the literature, point the way for interpretation that is a deep expression of the essence of this experience. Through writing and re-writing about the women's experiences and continuously questioning my personal biases and thinking, I came to focus on the deep meaning of the research question as it relates to these women's experiences.
CHAPTER 4

Women's Journeys: Experiencing Creative Expression

A woman
Connected with the souls of humankind
Nurturing self, nurturing others, nurtured by others

Daughter, sister, friend, partner, wife, mother, teacher.

Nurturing self by nurturing others.
Nurturing others and self.
Nurturing others (self).
OTHERS.

Until life's difficulties strike.

One small voice in the wilderness crying, pleading ... still alive ...
Others can see. Is there a me? I'm lost to the world. I'm lost to myself.
Where am I? Who am I? What is it to "be"?
Is it safer to keep the self hidden or to die?

A little colour, a little form, a little sound from deep inside.
Safe?
Trust.
Colour here, colour there, colour and form
Written words that express my soul's loneliness and heartache
Aromas that lift my soul high up into the sky
Movement, sensations, and sounds that touch my soul and bring it to new life

self

Self

SELF REBORN ... A Woman

I AM

A voice connected to others in a new way
Nurturing SELF to nurture others

M Y S E L F
A journey typically connotes travel over time and from one place to another. It is not the reaching of a destination that is key to a journey but, rather, the experience of the journey itself. The woman in this poem is on a journey from a place of give and take within a world where she feels alive in her connection with others. Gradually, as her life roles increase and she gives more and more of herself to those roles, she feels her own self diminishing and fading away. Faced with life's difficulties, she has little life left inside herself to sustain her through this difficulty and on her journey. The woman feels lost, not only within her world but to herself. She questions how safe it is for her to carry on, on her life journey. Gradually, and almost unnoticed by her, sensory stimuli that include colour and form through to aromas and sound come into her world in a new and creative way.

By gradually giving herself permission to trust the creative sensory presence in her world and to experience the effects of these sensory stimuli, she comes to know herself in a new way and to move along on her journey. The stimuli that the woman in this poem experiences include the visual effects of colour and form, the auditory effects of sound, the olfactory effects of various aromas, and the kinesthetic effects of touch and of movement. Within the context of creative sensory stimuli is the notion of expression. By expressing herself through sensory media, this woman creatively expresses her inner being such that her creative expression touches the most extreme depths of her heart and soul.

As she expresses herself in this creative way, she experiences ever more strength in herself as a person and in herself as a woman. This intensely personal relationship with her creative expression is, for the woman in this poem, a powerful
catalyst in her journey toward the rebirth of herself, in other words, toward experiencing a transition from being a woman lost in many traditional roles, to becoming a new woman reborn to nurture herself. She externalizes her thoughts, feelings, and experiences through her creative expression. Her world and self evolve as she becomes a new woman who is strong in and of herself and who, because of her new way of being, can also nurture others on her continuing journey. Rather than being lost within a world of others, the self of this woman has come alive.

Introduction

I wrote the previous poem after I viewed and reviewed the transcripts of my interviews with the six women participating in this study. From the transcripts, I wrote and rewrote about the themes that were beginning to emerge as I lived with, and read and re-read this data. This poem captures what I heard from the participants' descriptions of their experiences, up to the point that I came to more deeply understand their experiences. The poem is about one woman who exemplifies the experiences of the six women in this study who engaged in creative expression within significant life events. The interpretations in this chapter and in subsequent writings in this thesis are about these six women. This chapter, and Chapters 5 and 6, represent my return to the parts of the data in keeping with the hermeneutic circle. This return is my coming to understand these six women's experiences in a deeply involved way.

In this chapter I will discuss how this research came to be a study of women's experiences. I will include a brief profile of each of the six participants. These
profiles are intended to place each participant in her world as I perceived it. Later in this chapter, as I describe the various dimensions of these women's journeys, I will relay the anecdotes and stories that vividly express these women's lived experiences as told to me. My intention in this chapter, and in Chapters 5 and 6, is to fill out the background of the participants' creative expressive experiences such that the key themes become alive for the readers of this thesis.

**Women Participants**

Initially, I designed this research for both male and female participants and I sent my letter of introduction of this research to men and women. Many of those people expressed a strong personal interest in this research and indicated their intention to approach men and women who might be interested in being interviewed. All six participants who came forward, however, were female. I was not fully aware of how interviewing only women might affect the results of my research, until I began the initial interviews. It gradually became apparent to me that the stories that these women told were about their experiences as, and journeys of, women. Themes related to women's journeys and experiences grew stronger as I began data analysis and interpretation. It is, perhaps, for these reasons that the poem about a woman emerged as it did.

This research was also designed to focus on a significant life event that each participant considered to be significant. Initially, I anticipated that the significant life event might be a happy event, such as a wedding, through to a sad event, such as a death. Although some people whom I approached about this research identified happy events as a focus that a potential participant might choose, each woman who
came forward to participate, identified a difficulty in her life that was most significant to her and that was related to engaging in creative expression. Thus the focus of this research ultimately became the meaning, for women, of engaging in creative expression within the context of significant life events that were difficulties in their lives.

The women in this study each engaged in various forms of creative expression, as did the woman depicted in the previous poem. These women described their creative experiences with, for example, journalling, writing poems and songs, singing, painting, creating clay figures and throwing clay on a pottery wheel, quilting, and cooking. The women in this study talk about engaging in creative expression within the context of significant life events, as being on a journey. As I listened to the participants talk about their journeys, they expressed that their journeys have direction; they are journeys into their futures through their present lives and influenced by their past experiences. These women told me stories about listening to their bodies and engaging in the type of creative expression that best allows them to express their thoughts and feelings. They talked about their personal choices of creative expression and about the circuitous nature of their journeys. They described experiencing their journeys as a lifeline that promotes nurturance of themselves and of others, in community, in particular with other women. The women in this study told their stories of coming to experience possibilities in their lives through their creative expressive journeys.
Profiles of the Participants

I have included, below, a brief profile of each of the participants in this research to give the reader a beginning sense of the significant life events and the creative expressive worlds of the participants. The names that are used for the women are pseudonyms.

Carol

Carol is married and a mother of six children. The eldest was 10 years old and the youngest was 16 months old at the time of the first interview. The significant life event that Carol identified was a postpartum depression that continued for about one year after the birth of her fifth child, approximately three years prior to the first interview. Carol had been sick throughout that unexpected pregnancy.

Carol said that she has engaged in creative expression since she was about eight years old. Her creative expression from about age eight to about age 18 included paintings, academic exercises, and three dimensional creations from cardboard. She explained that when she became a wife and mother, she progressively decreased her involvement in creative expression to the point of stopping any creative endeavours that were personally fulfilling. It was at the time of her postpartum depression that she returned to engaging in creative expression, particularly painting. A few examples of artifacts that Carol created at that time and told me stories about were a clay piece she calls “Joy,” a watercolor triptych of female nudes, and a painting of pears. Carol spoke about the meaning, to her, of reclaiming her creative self both for herself and for her family.
Penny

Penny’s significant life event occurred approximately one year before the first interview. She was dealing with depression related to the break-up of her marriage and had been experiencing symptoms of depression for the previous 10 years triggered, initially, by postpartum depression 18 years ago. She has two children who were ages 15 and 18 at the time of the first interview.

Penny said that she had suspended most of her creative expression since the time her children were very young, except for craft projects or creative endeavours that met a family need, such as making cakes. She explained that journalling was her initial creative expression that was related to her significant life event. Penny said that her writing increased as she planned to leave her husband, and her writing decreased when she was actively taking the steps to leave her husband. Penny explained that once her marriage ended, she began writing poetry and she also created a tile to be placed on a community wall of tiles.

Penny said that her creative expression gave her the means of moving through her postpartum depression and a related suicide attempt as well as the means to explore her sexuality. She explained that her creative expressive process involved thinking, writing, and acting on what she wrote. Penny said that her writing solidified her thoughts, and that by making her creative expression public, her decisions about her marriage and her sexuality were given permanence. Penny is in a lesbian relationship at present.
Isis

The significant life event for Isis was her attempted suicide five years prior to the first interview as a result of the break-up of a relationship. Before attempting suicide, she was in psychotherapy and was journalling. During psychotherapy, Isis said she engaged in hypnosis work and imagery to help her to vent her anger rather than turning it inward. She explained that she considers hypnosis and imagery to be creative expression because she created her places of imagery.

Isis also described engaging in a variety of creative expression that includes writing songs, playing the guitar, singing, journalling, and painting. Music was a key part of her relationship because she and her partner sang together especially in church. Isis said that when her relationship ended, the music in her life died for a short time and it was this lack of music that she experienced as significant. She said that engaging in creative expression is, for her, to be alive. Isis does not have children and now is in a new relationship.

Susan

Susan's significant life event was being alone during three consecutive six-month winters of house-sitting in an isolated area. She began the house-sitting about three years before the first interview. Susan explained that the place where she was house-sitting was in direct contrast to the warmth of and companionship in the home of her friends where she stayed on several occasions when she was not house-sitting.

It was one of those friends who taught Susan how to quilt. She explained that she chooses to hand-quilt when she is with her friends in order to be in their
company and to feel their body warmth. She said that she prefers hand-quilting over machine-quilting because she has more of a connection with the creative process and considers her hand-quilts to be more valuable.

Susan described that she had omitted creative activities from her life for about two years previously due to her emphasis on assisting others with their own creative expression. She explained that quilting is a way for her to express and receive love and friendship. Susan said that when she was house-sitting her quilts became her social connection. According to Susan, it was engaging in quilt-making on her own and with her friends, that enabled her to live alone through those isolated winter months of house-sitting. At this time, Susan is single and does not have children. Her family lives in another city in British Columbia.

Lisa

Lisa’s significant life event was the miscarriage of her third child approximately one year prior to the first interview. At the time of the miscarriage, she had two children ages 10 and 12. Lisa was three months pregnant at the time of the first interview and is married. Within three weeks of her miscarriage, Lisa started taking pottery classes. She said that this was something she had wanted to do for a long time before her miscarriage but had delayed it because of her other roles and because of her discomfort working in groups of women.

Lisa explained that after she learned how to throw clay on a pottery wheel she felt compelled to make many containers with lids. She described making various pottery shapes that evolved from closed containers, to shapes that were increasingly more open on the top and looked more and more like a woman’s
shape. On the outside of one of those open shapes, Lisa added a clay design that she said is representative of giving herself permission to express her feelings externally.

Barbara

Barbara’s significant life event is her neighbour’s struggle with breast cancer over a two-year period and her neighbour’s ultimate death three months before the first interview. Barbara became close friends with her neighbour and they shared tea and meals and family activities. Barbara is married and has two children who were ages 11 and 21 at the time of the first interview. The 11-year-old is best friends with the child of the neighbour who died.

Barbara explained that her way to nurture people who are going through a crisis is to prepare food for them. She said that she had to cook, after her neighbour died, as a way to escape from the trauma she felt and to refocus. She described that her cooking is her way of doing something constructive.

Barbara said that she likes to be alone when she cooks in time of a crisis. It is a time for her to think about the crisis while she is doing something she likes to do. She explained that, eventually, she writes about her experience of the crisis and that the writing process is a highly emotional and painful, yet necessary experience for her emotional healing.
Participants' Journeys

The women in this study talk about experiencing a sense of forward movement as if traveling on a creative expressive journey where paths are repeated, partially retaken, or not repeated at all. In this section, I will describe the women's journeys that contain a range of experiences from roadblocks and turbulence to smooth sailing, exciting vistas, and amazing discoveries, all which change their perspectives of themselves and of their worlds.

The starting point of the journey depends not only on the significant life event, but also on journeys that came before. For many of the women, their journeys start well back in time, at moments in their childhoods when they were involved in and excited by creative expression or when their creative efforts were diminished by others. Carol talks of returning to her childhood, a place where she experienced the joy of engaging in art. "As a child, I really loved art and I loved making things with my hands and really expressing the intangible things in life, through tangible materials." Her creative childhood felt safe to her and it allowed her to be herself. As a child, Carol allowed herself to spend time in that creative environment. She talks about how, as a result, her creative expression reflected the freedom she felt, her openness to life, and its rays of sunshine. She says, "how strong and enthusiastic my work was when I was young and I didn't have any preconceptions of life. It's very playful." This recollection of Carol's contrasts with her adult life. Gradually, as her children arrived, she did not allow herself to take time with her creative expression. Her lack of creative expression in combination with postpartum depression after the birth of her fifth child was, as Carol describes, "a place that leaves you in shreds,
there is no way to climb out, and nobody can see into it because it is so private."
This was a very dark and hopeless place to be.

Another aspect of a childhood experience with creative expression is described by Lisa. As a child, she experienced support in her creative expression; however, as an adolescent, she discovered that her childhood drawings were not good enough for her mother to send them in to a contest. A "purple Bambi deer with orange spots" does not depict a real deer. As a young child, Lisa wondered why she was never a winner, because she had understood that her mother was submitting the drawings to the contest. When Lisa learned that her mother threw the drawings away, Lisa describes feeling devastated.

Lisa's creative expressive journey started as a child. However, it was not until she took an art course as an adult that she realized the extent of her feelings of devastation of hearing about her mother's reaction to her art. In response to an exercise to depict in collage what art means to her, Lisa intuitively created a picture of herself behind bars. When describing this picture to others in the art class, she says she was surprised to find herself in tears. Lisa explained that as a child, her freedom to create was very important to her. It was not until she was an adult that she again discovered her freedom to create by producing this picture, and then understanding the impact of her mother's disclosure on herself as an adolescent. Lisa had taken her mother's actions as an attack on her very self because Lisa considered her art to be part of herself. Her response to her mother's disclosure had stifled Lisa's creativity and curtailed her creative freedom until it emerged again in the art course. Following this revelation and in combination with her significant life
event, Lisa readily began pottery classes after her miscarriage. This was the beginning of Lisa's creative expressive journey that is directly linked to her significant life event.

Isis describes yet another type of childhood experience that has had an impact on her journey. She talks about how her childhood affected how she has dealt with her significant life event as well as the impact of her creative expression on how she has handled her emotional pain.

At the time of the suicide attempt and shortly thereafter, it occurred to me that I was not coping well with life. In terms of knowing how to manage things. I had grown up being emotionally and physically abused. I was belittled because I forgot things all the time, because I couldn't attend to tasks. For the most part, my childhood memories are one of being emotionally abused in the sense that I never ever felt I was worth anything. And no one taught me how to value myself. No one taught me how to deal with anger. No one taught me what to do when people in my life whom I cared about, hurt me. Like don't cry, just get over it. That's really helpful. Particularly when you're a really sensitive kind of person.

So the work, the journalling, the meditation, that's a creative expression, too, that went with the hypnosis. And then months later in the summer, I started writing songs. And all of that was the working out of all of that stuff. The figuring out, the re-parenting myself. That I didn't have to hold on to the pain that someone had inflicted in me.

Isis relates her emotional and physical abuse as a child to her difficulty handling life events and her subsequent suicide attempt. She describes not being taught as a child how to manage being hurt by others, thus as an adult, Isis says she has difficulty rebounding from depression when she is hurt, like when her partner left their relationship. Eventually, through a range of forms of creative expression, she was able to work her pain outside of herself and, in essence,
re-parent herself. Though Isis’ present journey is focused on a significant life event as an adult, her journey began in her childhood.

The women talk about taking on various roles, such as wife and mother, throughout their lives as growing women. They describe that as they take on these roles, their creative experiences and creative selves are altered, curtailed, or starved, and the person whom they were, disappears. Carol explains her experience of loss of her original self and its effect on her journey.

There’s nothing wrong with being unselfish. There’s nothing wrong with giving up and sacrificing. Those are all very honourable things, but, I think sometimes you can give up too much and that integral part of who you are when you give that up, then the person that all those other people love isn’t there anymore. So that is sort of what happened to me, this idea about what a good wife and a good mother and a good friend and what all those other things are. Then I kind of realized that the person wasn’t there anymore because I’d sort of kept pushing aside the things that were important to me because they’re time consuming or other people didn’t understand them or whatever.

Carol realizes that a balance is necessary between giving up some of her self for the sake of another, and meeting her own needs through creative expression. Because she met her mother, wife, and friend roles in the traditionally accepted manner, Carol experienced that she lost her focus on what was important to her. In so doing, the very core of her own being faded away. Carol realizes that if she is to survive, she can no longer ignore her own needs regardless of whether or not her art takes time away from other’s needs or whether or not others understand her creative expression.

It is within this atmosphere of neglecting their creative expressive needs that the significant life events of these women impact their lives as they do. This is not to
say that their significant life events would have been less significant or less painful if they had been actively involved with creative expression. Rather, without their creative expression, the women’s means of coping were diminished. By engaging in creative expression, the storms of despair, grief, and loneliness within their significant life events eventually are coupled with the light that becomes ever so slowly apparent through an internally driven creative expression.

Isis explains how the storm of her significant life event coupled with a variety of forms of creative expression led her in a new direction on her journey.

Music was an important part of my relationship. It defined part of that relationship. When my partner left, the music in my life died. Then, in February I’m taking pills, taking pills trying to do myself in, not wanting to be here anymore because it’s so painful and in December of that same year, I am in a recording studio making a demo of five of my songs with two other people. The choice to live is like from one moment to the next, then you have to live the choice. I chose to live in February and then I had to live that choice. And I had to start putting pieces back together and I had to start learning how to cope with and how to handle things. And there’s a whole lot of stuff to process, which was the journalling which started before the suicide and went on a little bit afterwards. There’s the song-writing and the meditation, all of that internal kind of work in making sense of everything that came before so that I can go forward in the way that I want to go and not be repeating the same difficulties.

Isis’ journey is one of great change, ranging from her suicide attempt after her partner left their relationship to her new, positive perspective on life. Through journalling, song-writing, and meditation, she makes sense of the difficulty and trauma related to the loss of her partner and her relationship. She has come to know that she has strengths that can sustain her during rough seas. Isis knows herself in a new way and she sees the value of holding on to her life and her world. She
learns how to cope with the difficulties in her life and to travel forward into her future with renewed abilities.

For the study participants, their creative expression becomes signposts of their progress, and reflections of straight stretches, twists, turns, temporary stoppages, and detours in their travels. At one point in Lisa’s pottery she stops making a container shape with a lid that depicts to her, rough parts of her journey.

(See Appendix E)

I knew I was upset. I knew I was sad. I knew I had to get that out. But, I sort of felt like I was going to be a big old wimp if I let it come out. So here I am just trying to contain things. To keep things packed away in the little box. And at the same time, I think, it probably represents the container that’s inside women. The womb. That things can grow in. But obviously nothing can grow in that because it’s just a little box. You can put things in it, but nothing’s going to grow in it. It’s dark. There was also the fear here with the closed containers. Everybody who did know [about my miscarriage], it was like, “Well are you going to try again?” And at that point I thought, “I can’t go through this again. If I get pregnant again and have another miscarriage...I mean, I’m devastated right now, it’s not going to be any easier to do it a second time.” So I think, when this pot belly shape came in my pottery, the belly and the open top, I was thinking, “Okay, maybe it is possible for me to have another baby again.”

Lisa experiences that it is enlightening to make pottery that ranges from closed to open shapes. When she made the closed shapes, they depicted to her an awareness of her need to keep her thoughts and emotions covered up as a reflection of her interpretation of the societal norm of staying in control. Her thoughts and emotions include her grief over the loss of a life from within, her child, and her fear of facing another miscarriage if she becomes pregnant again. The closed shape

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1 Lisa’s box with a lid
also represents to Lisa, her womb that gave way to her miscarriage. When the belly and open shapes emerged in her pottery, it reflected to her the possibility of fertility and growth. To Lisa, this is a sign of progress in her own understanding, thinking, and experiencing, that she is capable of producing life in the future. It is at this point on her journey that she was able to consider the possibility of getting pregnant again and not having a miscarriage.

When the women are in the midst of their journeys, there appears to be no particular end point; the destination continues to unfold. Lisa sees the progress of the different shapes that emerge in her pottery "as the whole healing process. I'm going through each stage. I'm expressing it in what I'm making. I can see it and I can say, 'Yea. Yea. Okay.' I can see I'm moving along." The journey is one of continual personal growth. Barbara talks about finally putting past traumas to rest through the writing process, yet, continuing on another journey in her life by dealing with her most recent significant life event, the death of her neighbour. Barbara explains how she dealt with a past significant life event prior to her neighbour's death.

A letter I wrote to my aunt a month before she died was kind of like finally putting the marker on the grave. Writing is that final expulsion of what I need to off load. I'm not ready to let go of my neighbour thing yet.

Barbara is moving from one journey to another within her overall life journey. In this sense there exists the possibilities of overlapping journeys within life. The focus, here, is on the journey related to each woman's significant life event. However, additional past and present journeys have an impact on the significant life events that each woman has identified for this study.
**Journeyming: Past, Present, and Future**

The women's journeys are ones of eventual forward movement from the past, through the present, and toward the future. The journey is not linear because the women describe revisiting past events in order to, then, move forward. As I indicated earlier, the past can reach far back into their lives, sometimes into their childhoods. Their pasts also include their significant life events that occurred in their recent or not so distant pasts. Their present moments shift as time shifts forward and their present is directly affected by their pasts. The future is considered by the participants as any time in the future as long as forward motion is anticipated and even expected.

Isis tells her story of shifting from the present to the past and forward to the future. (See Appendix E)

My song-writing over the summer dealt with past issues. The first song was about my relationship that had died. The seven-year relationship. It was all about my ex and that relationship. Then the song about suicide and then a very positive song about what life is. That's one of my favourite songs. The basic words to the first verse are that life is such a funny thing. It asks us to be open to possibilities and change, to sometimes being broken. And the refrain is, "That's how it was when I met you." So a bit of a reflection back to the seven-year relationship. "That's how it will always be. We were always meant to be open and we'll always be broken by things. Sometimes we laugh, sometimes we cry. But always we are free. There's that choice. You choose every day to keep going." So there's a whole evolution in the song-writing that goes from looking back to the suicide to the looking forward. Okay, so this is what life is all about and this is how you handle it.

Within the present, Isis looks back and explores various aspects of her past, and considers future possibilities and eventualities. Her song-writing moves her

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2 Isis' positive song "We Are Free"
forward on her journey. Some songs are focused on one specific time in her life, for example her suicide attempt, whereas other songs stretch from the past to the present and on to the future.

However, it is not always possible for the women to recognize movement toward the future. When viewed from within the significant life event, the future commonly seems nonexistent and not possible.

Lisa explains how she felt soon after her miscarriage.

It's hard. You try to avoid these whole feeling things. Pushing it aside so you don't have to deal with it. I guess, after having the miscarriage, I felt like a failure. Even though everyone, and doctors always say, "It's not your fault, It's not something you did or didn't do, or some food you ate or something you didn't eat or a vitamin you didn't take." They always say, "It's not your fault." But still I felt this onus of responsibility because either I wasn't good enough or maybe there was something wrong with my body and I haven't been taking care of my body properly or whatever. I still felt that sense of responsibility.

Lisa's experience of having a miscarriage was, in the initial days following the significant life event, so traumatic for her that she was not able to see toward her future. She continues to dwell on how she felt after her miscarriage, to reflect on the path she had already taken, and question the decisions she had made on her journey prior to her miscarriage. No matter how clearly others may see beyond her significant life event, she is not able to see along the road toward her future. It is as if there is no light indicating to her where and how she is to proceed.

Once the women move past the grip of their significant life events, there comes a time when they experience closure in relation to the past event. Penny describes her creative expression as "a way of closing that door of knowing that I really was putting my old life behind me." There is a place for this ending to occur in
an expressive way that sometimes is deliberate on the part of the women. Penny tells her story of shredding her journals:

   It was like a funeral in a way. I was mourning what I had done, what had happened and I was in a very, very low state of mind. Very depressed and very upset. But I wasn’t crying as I did it. I was feeding it in and realizing I didn’t need it any longer. I knew that I would never want to go back and look at this. And my whole purpose with actually shredding it was so that nobody else ever got to see it because it was very, very personal to me. And regardless of however far into the future I would be, I didn’t really want to have that any more. I was putting the past behind me. And it really felt like that. As I did that it did feel like I was putting it behind me. So it was, I guess in a way, it was like a death.

Previously I showed that, for Barbara, her writing becomes a signpost that she has ended a journey. She describes this signpost as “the marker on the grave.” In contrast, Penny’s experience of shredding her journals points beyond a sign that her traumatic experience has come to an end. She engages in a funeral-type ceremony as her way of putting her past to rest both for herself and for anyone else who might read her journals. Once the door to her past and to her significant life event is closed, there is no going back. This experience with her journal depicts finality and a resemblance to death of the troubling event. No longer can she go back; instead, she is open to the future.

   While Penny leaves her past behind, Susan explains that she brings the past into her future. “I’m making a piece of history, piece of my past for my future.” Susan explains that because her quilts reflect her mood when she chooses the material, and that they also reflect her thoughts and feelings when she designs and sews her quilts, each quilt becomes her past, her history upon completion. Susan also says “when I make a quilt, it reflects what I want in my life.” She explains that she makes
her quilts to give away and for her future family that may include children. For
Susan, quilting is her way to bring special parts of her past and of herself, forward
into her future. However, she explains that she does not like to bring the past into
her future when her past includes her significant life event.

Susan tells her story of when her significant life event was reflected in one
particular quilt.

It was a really good pattern and a really good design and the colour
choices were excellent, but I didn't like it because it was my image of
being alone while house-sitting in the winter. There were about 21
different patterns of beige and that is how I was looking at the snow.
As dirty. Even though that was in December. It's still snowing. It's still
nice and fresh but that was my third year and I knew it was my last. I
didn't like shoveling that driveway. I didn't like taking out the garbage
to the smelly garage in order to keep it away from stray dogs. There's
nobody else who is going to do it so I have to. When my friend said,
"It's got to be the most beautiful quilt you've ever made." I thought,
"No!"

Even though Susan expresses her past in this quilt and she gives it away,
she is not happy with the quilt. The quilt does not reflect what she wants in life
because it is also an expression of her significant life event. Instead, it reflects what
she does not want in her life and because of that she experiences a distaste for the
quilt. She does not like this quilt's reminder of the past. In this example, and in
contrast to Penny's experience of ceremoniously ending the past, Susan chooses,
instead, to look away from the past.

For Susan, her journey beyond her experience of feeling isolated and lonely
while house-sitting, is her journey toward maturity. "As I was quilting, that's when I
was growing up." She is referring to not only making quilts for her future but to
making her own decisions about her future. Choosing to house-sit is one of those
decisions. Her quilting, for herself and for others, helps her live with that decision.

**Defining Moments**

Journeys, in general, contain memorable moments that typically lead a
person in a new direction—likewise for the women in this study. Each participant
speaks of key aspects of her creative expression and one or more defining moments
within her journey that have propelled her creative expressive experience forward.
Carol describes her story of going to a workshop on creativity and spirituality during
her postpartum depression. (See Appendix E \(^3\))

We had to do an exercise where we described a moment or emotion
out of clay. This was my little person called 'Joy'. It just fell out like it
was just there and I re-found that place I had always been in as a
child. That was the moment when I knew, okay, if I'm going to come
through this and my family is going to come through this and my
marriage is going to come through this, then I have to reclaim this part
of who I am because I've given up too much. So, that was really the
pivotal moment when I decided, okay, I'm going to reclaim that
somehow. That art. Just take it.

The defining moment for each of these women, catapults them forward in
their journey as if there is no turning back. Carol knows without hesitation that if she
is to survive emotionally, her creative expression will have to continue to be a key
part of her life. She also realizes that her life roles as a woman have dwarfed her
very self. It is at this juncture on her journey that she knows how to survive and that
she will survive her significant life event. The other women speak similarly of their
defining moments. They describe feeling as if they have won even though they still

\(^3\) Carol's clay piece called "Joy"
have miles to go and only themselves with whom to compete.

Winding Course of the Journeys

At first glance it seems as if the journeys of these women are entirely forward moving. However, the participants describe winding or more circuitous paths that they forge in order to move forward into their futures. These shifting paths are not always smooth. The women meet with logs and boulders that interfere with and delay them on their journeys. For example, Isis describes a second unsuccessful relationship after the ending of the first relationship and her suicide attempt. Yet, by engaging in creative expression, these women are able to find a way through rough territory. Some participants graciously accept detours and backward movement as if there is unfinished business with which to attend before they can move forward. Lisa describes being surprised at the re-appearance of pottery shapes.

I thought it's over and done and that's that. And the shapes come out and I look at them and I think, 'Oh!...Ooh!!...Oooh!!! Now I see. I'm making this same belly shape. Okay. I need to deal with this whole thing again.' I'm still at the belly mode.

Lisa explains that when she makes the belly shape she needs to deal with accepting her body image both pregnant and non-pregnant and to come to terms with her difficulty and ability to create and hold life inside her. Lisa realizes that she is not finished processing her thoughts and feelings about her miscarriage. She is open to the natural, yet unexpected return to closed pottery shapes as her way of ultimately moving forward. All the while, through this journey, she is coming to terms with and coming to understand who she is as a woman.
Penny describes another aspect of the winding course of the journey.

It was the second night after coming off one antidepressant and before going on another. I wasn’t sleeping and I was really upset and something just said, “I have to look back.” And I started reading my journals for the first time and I picked out pieces of them, the very beginning, and about the middle, and towards the end. Not reading even whole pages, just excerpts.

I think that at the time it probably kept me sane. Because I realized that I had done all this work already, but I didn’t want to go through it again and I certainly felt like that’s what I was doing. And my old phobia of not leaving anything in writing in case something happened to me, basically. That’s where I was at. Without realizing it that evening, I was preparing for the worst. I was getting rid of the evidence. So I shredded and shredded and shredded. I had about four good-sized books worth and they all got shredded. As I would shred them, I would sometimes stop and look at a page. But for the most part it just all went in.

Penny had not read her journals before this event. However, when she comes up against a huge obstacle on her journey, symptoms of medication withdrawal, looking back on her work to date to escape further depression, helps her to realize the progress she has made. Ultimately, Penny shreds her journals to protect herself in case of her death. Later, she realizes that the act of shredding represents her not wanting to repeat the work of fighting her way out of the depths of yet another depression. Experiencing the medication withdrawal is like coming up against a log or boulder on her journey. Penny also experiences some light on her rough road by acknowledging to herself her progress and realizing that she has the power to move past yet another difficulty.

Once the women in this study move out of the clutches of their significant life events, their journeys gradually become smoother with greater emphasis on forward movement compared with backward or side trips. Not only does their creative
expression reflect their winding and circuitous journeys, it also reflects times of smooth sailing.

For some women their creative expression comes in stages. For others there are obvious cycles that are repeated in full or in part, and for others, their creative expression is a mixture of whatever approach fits for them in that moment of space or time. It is not important to these women how their creative expression occurs. It is important that the shifts in their creative expression are meaningful to themselves. Isis explains, "I don't write songs anymore. I haven't tried for awhile and it's not about trying. It's about doing what I need to do at the time. And in the past year or so it's been painting."

Each woman chooses the mode of creative expression that fits best for her at a particular moment or time. That fit relates to her level of comfort with the form of expression that she chooses and to the way that the mode of expression enables her to express her thoughts and feelings. The choice of creative expression is personal and happens intuitively.

**Lifelines Within the Journeys**

Engaging in creative expression within the context of their significant life events means, for these women, that they are each connected to a lifeline of energy. This lifeline keeps them grounded, yet free to grow, change, be themselves, and know themselves as they move forward on their journeys.

Carol describes the story of her lifeline:

I'm willing to give up this, and this, and this, but I won't give that up again." I won't. I can't. I'm not willing. I just won't. Call me stubborn, call me selfish, call me whatever negative connotation you can come
up with. That's okay with me. I can live with the fact that our house won't be finished for another year, that my husband is gone a lot and has to work a lot. I can live with all those things but I cannot give this up. I will not give this up again. Not for money, not for love, not for anything. Because if I do, I can't stay here, because I realize, now, that my emotional survival is intrinsically linked with this creative process. And that is who I am. At the very core of my being, that is who I am.

Now that I've accepted the seriousness of my paintings that illustrated how I was feeling and where I was going, now I'm going to lighter work. I just finished those little pears on the wall. That's quite, I would call it, surface. It was just "Oh, those are pretty. I'll give that a try and see." It was just kind of an experimental thing. Now I can look at it and go, "Yeah, this is very real." I can accept the realness of it and I can make my work my play. It's not my lifeline anymore. Well it is still. It is still. But I think in our culture we take ourselves way too seriously and I've learned that I can accept that that's who I am and I can play with that. Because when I make my work my play, life is so much more fun. I'm not going to be a serious artist and make capital "A" art all the time. Because then that spirit of exploration and experimentation of the searching for truth gets lost in the academia of art.

Carol's creative expression is her lifeline in the sense that without it she feels that she can not or will not survive. Her internal power and strength come from engaging in creative expression. This new vision and understanding sustain her as well as move her toward a different way of looking at life in general and of looking at her own life. Once she accepts creative expression into her life and she accepts its tremendously positive impact on her, Carol moves on to creating art that she describes as being fun in that it does not necessarily reflect her self-image or her need to work through or resolve personal thoughts or feelings. Without her creative expression she says she cannot survive. The nature of her art has changed. It is as intensely personal as it had been when she was experiencing her postpartum depression; however, there now is freedom in the realization of its importance, and a lightheartedness that reflects that freedom.
Carol describes that it is not until she taps into her creative expression that the lifeline she once experienced is present to her again. "I realized that the place of dryness wasn't really dry at all. It had just gone untapped for a very long time." Because she had engaged in very little creative expression over the past few years, Carol is feeling as if her lifeline of energy had become dry. When she returns to her creative expression she is relieved to re-experience that previous energy.

A lifeline has a component of power and life that seemingly comes from another source. Penny explains, "Something, somewhere, somebody helped me do it." She is referring to the possibility that she may not have been able to journey forward without this undefined lifeline.

**Self-Nurturing**

For the women in this study, their personal lifelines include nurturing themselves. A common theme among them is that because of their roles, these women have not taken time to fulfill their own needs. Penny tells her story of putting her needs last both because of societal expectations and because of an expectation of her own that she learned and accepted over time.

To be able to journal when life is very painful. It is a way of nurturing myself, of regrouping, of stopping and taking a deep breath. For me that's, I think, what my creativity is all about. It's the ability to take time out of what is going on around me. In regards to the life changing event, that was very painful and it was definitely an escape and a breather and that was for me. It wasn't for anybody else. It was just for me.

Taking time for herself gives Penny a renewed sense of strength. Creative expression is a form of ongoing sustenance for Penny. It is through her journalling
that she experiences a breath of fresh air to enable her to move forward on her journey. Her journalling is meant to meet only her needs and no one else's.

The close family members of these women and the women themselves notice when creative expression is not in their lives. Barbara describes her husband's reaction to her cooking. "It's taken him years and years to understand that I need to cook. He's finally realized that. I guess he can see a look on my face or something." Barbara's need to cook is now understood by her husband and that understanding, triggered by his noticing, is a relief to her.

Carol describes her own noticing of her need to paint.

I notice if I'm too tired and I don't go down to the basement and paint. I feel it for a few days. I notice it and I just see it in my personality, the way that I interact with my world.

This noticing gives credence to the creative expressive journey such that the very act of engaging in creative expression is not relegated again to an activity of unimportance. Noticing when creative expression is not in the lives of these women is an acknowledgment of the value of creative expression, not only within their immediate lives, but also on their journeys to continually care for themselves.

**Nurturing Others**

The women in this study speak of their personal lifelines as an interwoven power and strength coming from both their creative expression as well as from the satisfaction that they feel from being a part of the experience of others' journeys. Susan describes an aspect of nurturing herself that relates to nurturing others. She nurtures herself by giving her quilts to others as a sign of her love for them. In turn, she feels connected to others.
Quilting means to express my love. I think that's the biggest thing. My ability to love and the love that I get and friendship. Because I give most of them away. It's my telling the people that I'm giving my quilts to, that I love them.

The loneliness she experiences when she is house-sitting in an isolated environment is reduced by focusing her quilting toward a loved one. Susan meets her own need to feel loved and to give to and receive love from others by expressing herself in her quilts. She also meets her needs by giving a piece of herself to others by giving her quilts away.

Barbara says, "I seem to have a knack for picking the right kind of thing for what they've been through. Like comfort food....It makes me feel useful." Cooking meets her own needs and simultaneously meets the needs of others. (see Appendix E 4) Barbara explains.

I'm nurtured by the act of preparing the food, through giving people sustenance. My neighbour and her children and my family spent the last two Christmases together. So, since I didn't have that, this year, I invited 30 people over and fed them. I created my audience.

Barbara is dealing with the recent death of her neighbour. To meet her need to stay focused by having others around her for whom to cook, Barbara replaces her usual Christmas family and neighbour gathering with preparing a meal for a chosen group of people. She experiences self-nurturing through the response of her audience. By nurturing others, Barbara travels forward on her own journey. Additionally, Barbara also nurtures herself through preparing the food and, ultimately, is better able to nurture others.

4 Barbara's recipe for comfort food, “Turkey Meatball Chowder”
Barbara goes on to explain how nurturing others gives her momentum on her journey.

My cooking keeps me grounded....It helps me to stay together. It helps me to stay focused. It helps me. Because I don’t want to become a useless idiot in a time of crisis. I need to find a way to keep myself going. And that’s how I keep myself going. It provides me with a form of nurturing for myself to keep from coming unglued.

If I were asked to do something that I wasn’t comfortable with, that I wasn’t good at, it wouldn’t be good. I would just become unglued and become useless to everyone and I don’t want that. So I choose something that I’m really comfortable with. It keeps me together so that I can help others. And it has a side benefit of providing sustenance for people in their crisis.

Barbara experiences that cooking ultimately enables her to help others in their crisis, but not before she helps herself through cooking, to stay emotionally in one piece. Cooking is her way to move ahead on her journey and not become stuck in her significant life event, thus fall to pieces. She is comfortable in her cooking and it is within that comfort that she helps both herself and others.

The notion of nurturing self and others has links for Barbara to a past significant life event when she was a child.

When I was 13 months old, I am an only child, my dad was killed in a logging accident just before Christmas. This is a huge crisis in my mother’s life. I don’t have any particular recollection of the event, but over 40 years later, I still hear about it. It’s been a huge issue and event in my mother’s and my lives. She had to work nights at a restaurant and she ended up putting me in a foster home during the week and she would pick me up on the weekend. Even though the people with the foster home are wonderful, they would deny me certain foods and, then, they would make me eat, they would force things. So food, as a form of nurturing, has probably been an issue in my life.

At a very young age, at a time when Barbara was without her father
forever and without her mother during the work days, Barbara experienced difficulties related to food. Her experience of food being denied to her and forced upon her, is in stark contrast to the natural nurturing capacities of food, the nurturing experience of being fed, and feeling comfortably full when with her mother. It was not that she felt a lack of nurturance when with the foster family, it was that she was denied the experience of nurturance through food and at a time when she may have been nurtured through milk in a bottle. To this day this experience has remained a major influence on her view of food as a way to nurture herself and others.

Barbara takes the notion of being nurtured by food one step farther. She communicates her caring of others through food. In turn, she needs to hear that those to whom she gives prepared dishes of food, appreciate both the food and her efforts.

I really need that positive feedback. That's really important. If people say, "Oh, thanks." That's the last casserole they're getting. I really need to be patted on the head and told, "I appreciate that." I need to feel important, feel necessary, feel like I had some worth to provide in someone's trauma.

Barbara has a great need to feel that her nurturance of others is not only appreciated, but that the very act of her preparing food for others in a crisis makes a positive difference in their recovery from their trauma. While nurturing others, Barbara experiences being nurtured to move forward on her own journey. Those people experiencing a trauma are nurtured on their own journeys.

When Barbara's neighbour was sick, Barbara prepared meals for her neighbour and family as her usual way to promote the healing process. However, Barbara did not always experience that her cooking was appreciated.
My cooking was not always appreciated by my neighbour and her children. But in the end, when the whole family was there from all over the place, of course my cooking was appreciated. And I even became less of a cook and more of a coordinator because everyone saw me beginning to really feel the crisis. All my friends started to cook for me. It felt great because they were communicating with me the way I had communicated with them.

Ultimately, Barbara communicates caring for others through her cooking. When she cooks for her neighbour and neighbour’s children, even though she does not always hear that her cooking is appreciated, Barbara eventually receives that expression of appreciation from her neighbour’s family during the days leading up to and after the funeral. In turn, when Barbara experiences the intense crisis of her neighbour’s death, Barbara, herself, is in need of being nurtured. Cooking not only is Barbara’s way to communicate caring to others but her friends communicate their caring of Barbara by cooking for her as she continues to nurture her neighbour’s family. By preparing food for Barbara, her friends communicate to her that they understand the critically important connection between nurturing herself and others. Without being nurtured, herself, Barbara would have had little energy to nurture others and to move along on her own journey to deal with her significant life event.

**Being Energized by Community**

Specific groups of people are important to these women as they journey forward. These groups of people are small communities of people who have an affinity with the same type of creative expression. The participants speak about the energy they receive from these communities of people and the influence of this energy on their ability to engage in creative expression. While working in concert with their communities, these women experience strength from their supporters and
from others’ creative expression. For these women, their communities of people strongly influence their journeys by providing support. The women in this study describe the support and strength they receive from their communities of people, as being unique.

Penny tells her story of working with other women while creating a tile for a community tile project.

There were young girls there, and some older women, all age spectrums. I would say that women came and went all afternoon. It was about three or four hours, and I stayed. I stayed and I talked to people and I looked at what other people were doing and just took my time about what I was doing. When it was over I felt, I don’t know if I want to use the word comforted, but close to that. It was a feeling of peace just being able to do something like that and create something. There was acceptance there. Some of the women were lesbians and others were not. So, while I may have had questions about my sexuality, they did not. It was an atmosphere of acceptance of being with people who didn’t have questions about me and just were talking and being part of a different community than I had been in. It was an afternoon of sharing and it was really comfortable.

For Penny, a community of women is a lifeline that empowers her within her creative expression to deal with the break-up of her marriage. Penny experiences a sense of peace within the community of women while she works to complete her personal tile. That peace is reflected in creating her tile in her own way and at her own speed without feeling hurried or judged in any way. Penny experiences that it is okay for her to be herself on her creative expressive journey. She experiences that a community of women with a bond of the same interests is a source of power and strength. The women who are making the tiles work individually while being together. Within her individual creative expression that takes place alongside other
women, Penny finds the strength to further work through the loss of her marriage. The tile she creates reflects her emotions at that time. (See Appendix E ⁵)

When she quilts with her female friends, Susan describes a variation of community compared with what Penny experiences.

The individual making of the top is very social because I sit there and we talk or we watch television. I make my own tops because I want my quilts to be mine. I want them to have my expression in them. But when it comes to actually putting the whole thing together, it becomes a quilting bee. We’re all in there together and we’re all stretching it out and we’re all pinning or basting. It becomes like a tea party. I need that family environment. I need that feedback.

Susan experiences being in the company of her quilting friends as a comfortable social event that enhances her creative expression. Susan is strengthened by her own involvement in her quilting community by joining her friends in assisting each other with their quilts. It is a mutual caring that strengthens Susan in her quest to resolve her feeling of isolation.

Lisa experiences the social nature of working with a group of women and feeling cared for by these women. She also experiences that she can learn from the community of women at pottery, as well as from women in other areas of her life, and be energized by their experiences. The experiences of the women at pottery range from having knowledge of throwing clay on a pottery wheel to life experiences with which they have struggled and survived.

In my life I don’t think I’ve always been, or felt maybe connected with women, or felt comfortable, maybe around a group of women. I always feel like I don’t belong. I think being able to be around this group of women at pottery, in particular, and being able to learn from them, I not only learned about making pottery but I learned a lot about other

⁵ Penny’s tile
people’s lives, things that they do to cope. I also learned that I could learn from and lean on and get that support and come out of it feeling like I belong. Slowly, as I would confide in somebody, at work or at pottery, about my miscarriage, someone would come up to me and say, “This happened to me too.” I came to know that it’s okay to be upset about this. And it’s okay to feel the way I feel. I graduated with, well, I don’t necessarily need to keep a lid on everything and keep it all boxed up because it’s okay. Other people have done this, too. And then I made a new shape.

The journey of creative expression is not a solitary endeavour. Lisa moves forward on her journey by making pottery within a community of potters who are all women. She grows as a woman by being open to hearing about the life experiences of other women. Lisa comes to realize that she is not alone on her journey. This is her journey, though others can relate to her journey and, in so doing, give her strength to carry on. Although they cannot tell her how she should proceed on her journey, their success at moving toward their futures indicates, to Lisa, the possibility that she will successfully navigate her own life course. Lisa’s pottery reflects her learning from and support by other women, her growth as a woman, and her journey to come to terms with her miscarriage.

**Conclusion**

The experience of creative expression for these women is a journey from the past, through the present and being moved toward the future. This journey is movement from points well back in time, often from their childhoods. As these women grow to become adults and take on adult roles, their own sense of self diminishes. When their significant life events occur during times of feeling disempowered, their journeys become rough and they struggle with which way to proceed. These women experience self-nurturance by engaging in creative
expression. The support they feel from their individual communities of people, particularly other women, is their lifeline, that gives them power and energy to move along on their course, over rocks and boulders, and along nonexistent trails. On their journey, they come to know the value of nurturing themselves. Some women nurture themselves through nurturing others. It is their own self-nurturance that is ultimately vital to their movement along their own creative expressive journey. By engaging in their creative expression these women move forward on their journeys to deal effectively with their significant life events and to envision and work toward possibilities in their futures.
CHAPTER 5
Connections and Responses: Relating To Creative Expression

The women's stories suggest there is significance in the relationship that each woman develops with her creative expression. Through deep self-reflection these women come to relate to their creative expression in unique ways and to develop new, in-depth relationships with themselves. In this chapter, I invite you, the reader, deeper into the worlds of these women and I will tell and interpret their stories within the context of their relationships with their creative expression.

Being Drawn Toward and Being Repelled From Creative Expression

The women describe being strongly pulled toward their creative expression and describe experiencing changes in the degree of this pull depending on the type of creative expression in which they engage. The type of creative expression in which they are being drawn to engage, reflects the work they are doing at any one time in order to deal with their significant life events.

Lisa tells her story of being strongly pulled toward throwing clay on a pottery wheel and toward painting.

I was obsessed with making these little boxes. It's like it just completely overtakes me. It envelopes me until I get it out. And I go, and go, and go, and go until I'm exhausted with that shape and I sort of have gone through the process. I painted whimsical cows on an old scrap piece of cardboard because it came to me and I thought, "I have to do it right now. And that's all there is to it. It's coming out and it's going down on paper, now.

Lisa experiences being compelled to make little clay boxes. She is consumed
by a pulling force that reaches to a seemingly unknown place deep inside herself to remove every replica of the experience of her miscarriage. Similarly, Lisa experiences a strong insistent need to paint whimsical cows. She describes the cows as representing a form of life. To her this draw to paint takes control of her actions much like the intensity of the birthing process. When Lisa’s painting is ready to be born, nothing is going to stop its emergence into the world. It is only after her creative expression is born that she is able to rest in relief that her work for the moment is complete.

As this precipitous birthing process of creative expression is occurring, it is a common experience for the participants in this study to be unable to engage in another type of creative expression with which they were involved in the past. Lisa explains that, presently, she is strongly drawn toward throwing clay on a pottery wheel, and she experiences being unable to make various hats that she had been making for years prior to her significant life event.

I had this little home-based business and I made hats. I sold hats at the craft fair every year. Every year! I made them. I designed them. I sewed them. I cut them. I did everything. When I had the miscarriage, and ever since then, I haven’t been able to make them. I don’t care to. I don’t want to. I can’t do it. I can’t bring myself to do it.

The catalyst for Lisa to change from making hats to working with clay is her miscarriage. She is drawn to the clay and repelled by the thought of making hats that had, just before her miscarriage, been a pleasurable type of creative expression. Lisa continues to explain that for her to switch from making hats to working with clay is a way for her to get in touch with nature and life and, in so doing, to allow her to explore her significant life event that is a loss of life.
The clay that I work with is organic and it's not a manufactured thing. The fabric is manufactured. It's not natural fabric. It's manmade fabric and it's not real. The clay is dirt and water mixed together and the whole metaphor of God creating life from dust and dirt and mixing it and making Adam and making Eve.

Creating hats from "manmade" fabric does not allow Lisa to replicate her experience of her miscarriage. By recreating a sense of life within her clay work Lisa experiences the possibility of creating life again within herself. Lisa is drawn to engage in creative expression through clay work because she can get as close as possible to creating life, in the biblical sense, from dirt and water.

Being drawn to or repelled by the mode of creative expression is dependent, for some women, on their environment. Susan explains her experience of vacillating between hand-quilting and machine-quilting. Though she does not experience being repelled against one or the other, her draw to hand-quilting or machine-quilting is evident.

When I was quilting when I was house-sitting, it was more of a means to an end. I had a project that I wanted to start, I had a person I wanted to give it to. The whole quilt was machine-produced.

When I am staying with my friends and they are not around, I usually machine-quilt. But if they are around, I want to do my hand-quilting because I like the body warmth and the people. I like to show what I do. I've always wanted to show my work because I'm proud of what I do and I work very hard and when I create something, I'm learning and I want to show people what I've learned. I feel that my hand-made quilts are more valuable.

Machine-quilting is the method that Susan chooses when she is alone, either when house-sitting in her isolated setting, or when alone while living with her friends. The focus of her machine-quilting, particularly when she is in her isolated setting is purely to complete a quilt. The focus of her hand-quilting goes far beyond
completing a project. It includes the warmth of companionship, and communication with her friends, both promoting her expression of pride in and valuing of her hand work. Susan experiences that her hand-quilting reflects her feelings of simultaneous closeness with her hand quilts together with her friends, connections she does not have when she is alone.

The women in this study, talk about being drawn toward and motivated to express themselves creatively when they are in a physical space in which they feel comfortable and with which they have a personal connection. Carol describes her relationship with her creative space.

The only responsibility I have is to go down to my creative place in my basement. I have to go there. Whether I actually finish something or whether I wash the brushes or whatever, That's my responsibility. It will give back everything else I need. But I have to choose to participate.

Carol realizes that it is not only her choice, but also her responsibility to be present in her special creative place in order for her to enter into the creative expressive process and in order for her creative expression to emerge. Without entering her creative space, Carol risks being unable to be influenced by her creative expression and to work through her significant life event.

Each woman in this study connects with her creative medium in an intuitive way. Carol, in describing her creative expression says she is “very much in the moment. I instinctively choose the pigments that I choose because I know somewhere that they'll behave in a certain way.” Carol follows her intuition in order to express herself creatively and she does not deliberately plan the products of her
creative expression. Susan, too, is guided by her intuition. She talks about the interrelationship between her intuition and her mood.

I live with the material and the material eventually tells me what it should be. The image and the colour, together, is who I am. When I buy the material it's my mood that I'm in that reflects my choices. It may get put away and then when I'm back in that mood, I bring out that material.

On the surface it is apparent that Susan expresses herself in her quilt designs. From the moment she engages in choosing the material through to deciding on the place of each piece of material, the colour arrangement, and the overall design, Susan is not working alone. It is the essence of the material that draws Susan toward an expression of herself rather than Susan drawing the material into an expressive form.

Beyond being drawn to or repelled from creative expression, these women describe that their relationships with their creative expression move into the realm of escape from their present worlds and from their significant life events. The features of escape include being in a safe place compared with their significant life events and gaining a sense of control of their creative expression. Even though, earlier in this chapter, Susan explains that she feels controlled by the quilting material, these women describe feeling a sense of control over their creative expression when they choose to engage in particular creative activities and when they decide how these activities will take place. When these women become open to the possibilities within the creative process, they talk about their creative activity exerting a power over them. Later, in this chapter and in Chapter 6, I will discuss the effect on the women of giving themselves permission to engage in creative expression in order for them
to be in control of themselves, and of trusting their vulnerability to the creative process.

At times, the women trust the creative process to be an escape from their emotional pain. Barbara describes her experience of escaping from the pain of her significant life event.

The only thing I can do when everybody is freaked out is come home and cook. That’s the only thing I can do. Cooking is a way of escaping, refocusing by getting away from the sad, ugly things. I felt helpless to help my neighbour so I had to do something constructive. Shortly after my neighbour died, I started to make Christmas baskets for everybody. After we got through all the nasty bits and after the family went, it was like, out came the cookbooks. I had to get all this stuff done. It was what I would think about a lot. The huge lists and staying organized. I was methodical. And Christmas could have come and gone and I could have not cooked anything. It wouldn’t have mattered to anyone. But it mattered to me. Because I needed something to focus on because it was just so hard to focus on the bad parts. It’s not so much that I didn’t have to think but I could think about it doing something I liked to do.

When Barbara experiences that her significant life event is too painful to face, and that the people around her are also reacting to the pain of the event, she feels that there is only one possible action for her to take to escape from the pain of her significant life event into the safe world of her creative expression. She is unable to face and think about her significant life event without first escaping into her cooking in an organized, methodical manner. Being in control within her world of cooking provides not only an escape for her from the pain of her significant life event, but also a safe place to process her thoughts about her neighbour’s death such that she is not overwhelmed by those thoughts. Barbara can view her significant life event from a place of safety. Ultimately, when she escapes into her world of cooking
Barbara begins to face the pain of her significant life event rather than to totally avoid the pain.

Valuing Self

Creative expression is more than a mere creation of artifacts. The creative expression to which I refer reflects the women's unique expression of themselves. By trusting and respecting themselves and their creative processes they discover a deepened understanding of themselves as creative expressors.

Carol explains her feelings when she realizes that no one else can do this work.

When I can express the spiritual essence of something, whether it is my little person, "Joy," or whether it is flowers, is huge! It is a rush. I get so excited. I'd be sitting on the couch reading a story to my kids and I had this feeling inside of my chest like I was going to giggle all the time. I was just giddy with that whole idea that I can actually express what my vision of my reality is and nobody else can do that.

Carol's profound happiness is an expression of her realization that in the entire world only she can connect with her inner being and then show that being to the world. Through her creative expression, Carol becomes strongly connected with herself. It is not merely that she tells her story to others, but that she becomes keenly aware of her own self and of her world through her creative expression.

Trusting in and Respecting Self and The Creative Process

The women express their innermost thoughts and feelings in their creative expression. Previously, I described Barbara's experience of escaping into a safe place. These women come to trust and feel safe within the creative process. Penny tells her story of trust.
The writing was initiated through psychotherapy. I was given exercises to do. And I enjoyed writing. Eventually it led into keeping journals. A very difficult thing for me because I have a hard time leaving anything on paper and lying around. So what I would write would generally get destroyed immediately. I was able to write journals and keep them for close to four months once I started. I wrote every day and I wrote a lot. At the beginning of the journalling it was the only place that was safe to say what I had to say. It was as if giving them to somebody who would never reveal it to anybody else. I was more honest in my journals than when talking to the therapist. In the past I had, had a bad experience with psychotherapy but, eventually, I came to trust the psychotherapy and the journalling.

Penny describes that when she comes to trust her creative expression, coupled with trusting psychotherapy, she is able to keep her writing without destroying her thoughts and words. She is also able to tell the truth in her journals because her journals become a place of safety for her thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Lisa comes to trust more than the creative process and her creative expression. She comes to trust herself.

Earlier, in this chapter, I identified that Susan values her hand-made quilts over her machine-made quilts. “I treat it like it’s more valuable. I take care of it more if the whole process has been hand-made.” Susan expresses respect for her hand-made quilts and, in effect, she is respecting herself since she becomes one with her hand-made quilts during the creative process. She also expresses this respect by the value she places on her hand-made quilts.

Susan tells another story of a hand-made quilt she gave away as a baby gift. The quilt is tattered and it’s falling apart and it’ll never be the same and they apologized. I had to say, “Well, I gave it to you to be used.” But it still hurt because that was something that I wanted the baby to have for the rest of his life. I’d have to say to myself, it’s for history, it’s for saving but the love is going to show in it from the use that it gets.
Susan values and respects her creative expression. When the recipients of her hand-quilts do not take care of them she experiences emotional pain that reflects others’ apparent de-valuing of her creative expression and, in essence, of herself. She comes to terms with these feelings by equating the rugged use of the quilt by the owner to his love of the quilt. Susan experiences the deep connection she has with her quilts and that, to her, her quilts and herself are one.

**Being Free to be Vulnerable**

Initially, it seems that these women benefit most by choosing when and how they will express themselves. However, the women in this study experience that to benefit from being in control of their creative expression, their control translates into giving themselves permission to engage in creative expression whenever and however they are drawn to the creative process. This permission emerges from coming to accept and trust the creative expressive process and trusting and respecting themselves within that process. These women create the context for either thinking their way through issues or creating their way through the maze of issues related to their significant life events by, for example, writing, painting, singing, sewing, cooking, or throwing clay on a potter's wheel.

Isis describes the importance, to her, of giving herself permission to engage in creative expression.

It’s all about letting me just be me, and that’s acceptable, and that’s okay. Because it never was. It never was. I never gave myself permission. No one taught me how to give myself permission to do those things. I was the kind of kid who hated art because every time I expressed myself in art, I got hurt. So I’m not telling anyone. I’m not sharing with anyone.
As a child, Isis learned that if she engaged in creative expression she risked other people's negative comments which caused her pain. As an adult, and through the process of coming to terms with her significant life events, Isis has come to realize that it is acceptable for her to express herself in her art regardless of anyone else's reactions. It is okay to be herself. By giving herself permission to express herself in creative ways, Isis ultimately connects with her own need to be herself without any self-imposed or other-imposed restriction or disapproval. Isis gives herself permission to be vulnerable to other's reactions to her creative expression.

The women build upon their trust and respect of the creative process and of themselves. They allow themselves to be vulnerable within the creative process. Susan relates her hand-made quilts to the hand created artwork she created in art school.

It is a building process. I would become one with my art and I would lose track of everything that's going on around me. There may be other stresses in my life but those stresses would be gone. The creative process, for me, if I'm really into what I'm doing, I can't talk. When I create my hand-made quilts, I put myself into the quilting.

When Susan is hand-quilting, she experiences herself as being part of her quilts and those quilts become an expression of herself as she creates her quilts piece by piece. Within her creative expressive process Susan is connected only with her quilts and is unaware of the world around her. She allows herself the freedom to be vulnerable within her quilting and whatever self-expression comes forth during the creative process. In so doing, she experiences a deep connection with herself.
Carol describes her experience of engaging in creative expression. “For me, God is source of me and of my ideas or of my creative expression. It’s like a channeling of that energy.” She experiences that her ideas come from God’s energy as if her creative expression and God are one. At times, these women enter a whole other plane and are swept into the creative moment. It means detaching from the world and trusting themselves and trusting the creative expressive process to take themselves seemingly to another place to work through their significant life events. They allow themselves to be vulnerable within that other plane.

Penny tells her story of getting lost in her creative expression.

Art was not an option for me when I had kids because I tend to get lost in it. When I paint, I tend to get lost. I don’t listen. I don’t pay attention. I’m gone. I didn’t do it anymore once my first child was born. I didn’t do it. I just stopped. What I did was take classes like paper tole and cake decorating, craft type things. I can relate art to journaling because I get lost in that. I can write for pages and pages. The time goes on. I’m not aware of what’s going on around me.

Penny talks about getting lost when she paints and when she journals. At these times, she is not oriented to the world but, rather, focuses on her painting or journaling. When Penny experiences getting lost in her creative expression she is vulnerable to the creative expressive experience. She is open to and allows herself to be drawn into a seemingly different world where her immediate cares and responsibilities no longer exist. She contrasts this experience with, for example making crafts at which time she stays present to the world. Unlike Lisa’s experience of seemingly being powerless to ignore the force that repels her from making hats, for Penny it is not an experience of being repelled from a particular type of creative expression. Instead, Penny chooses one type of creative expression over another in
order to maintain her life responsibilities. Penny explains that being responsible for her children is incompatible with her creative expression. She experiences a catch-22. In order to stay focused on and to meet her children's needs she cannot be vulnerable to and lose herself in her creative expression. It is only through allowing herself to be vulnerable to her creative expressive process that she fully experiences her creative expression. When her children were young Penny chose to abdicate her self nurturance through creative expression in order to nurture her children. Now, since her children are grown, she has regained the option to lose herself in her creative expression. Freedom from responsibilities for her children allows her to be free to be herself and to nurture herself. She needs only to stay focused on her own need to engage in creative expression and to be vulnerable within the creative process.

Lisa describes her experience of detachment within the creative expressive process. "When I added clay to the outside of my pottery it was like a thing that was happening and I'm watching myself doing it." She experiences a detachment of her body from the world as if she is viewing her creative process from a distance. It is as if Lisa is not in control of her creative expression but that, that control comes from another source and she is in an observer role and vulnerable to the influence of the creative process.

Sometimes these women experience a combination of detachments. Isis tells her story that combines the notion of getting lost with that of being outside her body.

I almost get lost when I journal in the sense that I don't know where I am physically anymore. It's like attaining an entirely different plane. It's a whole different place to be. So when I'm in my trance, in my space,
doing my thing, I'm not here. I'm not in this body anymore. It is here. I'm sitting here and I'll come back to here and all of that, but I'm not conscious of this being a chair, being in a day and a time and a place or any of those things. All of those traditional kinds of limits and boundaries are just washed away and I'm wherever it is I need to be. Talking to whomever it is I need to talk to. I'm working. Wherever I am, I'm working. And I'm working at the important stuff. There's some other plane where real life happens and where growth happens and where hurt is and where the struggle is to do and be and learn and become whatever it is you're supposed to do as an individual.

Isis experiences being lost in another plane where she is not conscious of her present worldly surroundings or her present body. It is in that other plane where she works through her significant life event via her creative expression. When Isis experiences being outside her body, that is where the real work of understanding, growth, and valuing herself as a woman occurs for her.

Barbara describes her experience of detachment that includes an array of body sensations that are key to her change of being.

In my finest moments, I like to be in my kitchen, by myself, nobody bothering me, and then I kind of go into this, I don't know if you'd call it a trance but I go into this mode and I'm warm, and I'm comfortable, and I'm moving, and the smells, and the senses, and the feels.

Barbara's bodily movements and the aromas in the kitchen, together with a range of senses and feelings from cooking with a variety of ingredients, bring her to a different place, almost a trance-like place. This different place is a place of warmth, comfort, and contentment that promotes her trust in and respect of herself and of the creative expressive process. This is a place where she is comfortable with being vulnerable to her feelings and to her creative expressive experiences.
Connecting With and Discovering Self

These women experience yet another dimension within their relationship with their creative expression. When they allow themselves the freedom to be vulnerable within the process of their creative expression, they experience a new relationship with themselves. They connect with their thoughts and feelings in a new and in-depth way and they come to discover their unique inner beings. When these women connect with and discover themselves in a new way, they tap into a unique source of energy.

In Chapter 4, I described that the women experience a lifeline of energy through engaging in creative expression and that this lifeline of energy propels them on their creative journeys. This lifeline has an additional quality. It is the means by which the women discover a new-found energy within themselves.

Lisa describes her experience of this energy.

I know enough about what I'm like when I make pottery that I know I can't, I am not, and I don't know if I ever want to be the kind of potter who makes what they want to make out of clay. I don't do that. If I set down to say, "Okay. this is what I'm going to make." It very rarely turns out like that. It comes out how it wants to come out.

Lisa describes not being interested in or able to create pottery with a style that she pre-determines; her pottery seems to have a will of its own. Lisa is open to making pottery that is reflective of her inner self. By being open to and feeling free to express herself in her pottery, she allows her own personal energy to drive her creative expression and, in essence, to give a sense of life to her pottery and to promote discovery of life in herself.
Experiencing Physical Sensations and Emotional Feelings

The women in this study talk about experiencing a range of strong physical sensations and emotional feelings often triggered by a variety of bodily senses, while engaging in creative expression. On the surface it seems as if the women’s internal responses are merely reactions to being involved with creative expression. However, woven into those responses are experiences that the women find to be extremely meaningful within the context of engaging in creative expression.

Responding with one’s body. When describing her experience of creative expression, Isis motions to her heart as the place where she feels its effects. Isis explains her response to other’s songs on compact disks:

Singing to their CD’s, that’s creative expression to me. They have songs that really speak to the kind of pain I was feeling around my partner leaving our relationship. It was somebody else’s words that meant something to me down here, in my heart where I live.

Isis’ heart is where she feels her pain and where she feels the meaningfulness of the songs. Singing to somebody else’s songs touches her heart because the words of the songs are an exact fit in describing the intensity of her pain. The songs serve as a way for Isis to connect to her own feelings as a source of personal energy.

Alternately, Lisa gestures with her hand moving away from her chest, referring to the relief of pent-up feelings. She describes this relief as “feeling lighter.” Lisa explains this sense of relief.

It’s just a relief. It’s like being tired. It’s like once it’s done then I just feel this Huuuh, this exhaustion. Like I had all this energy before and then I’m exhausted. I can go home and I can sleep.
In contrast to her earlier example in which Lisa's personal energy gave life to and drove her creative expression Lisa here, experiences that her creative expression is a way of releasing energy. It is as if Lisa experiences a transfer of negative energy from herself to her creative experience and thus away from herself. Lisa describes this energy release as a relief. She experiences this relief as a healthy exhaustion that induces sleep. Together with feelings of relief, when Lisa engages in her pottery, she feels at peace with herself and ultimately with her significant life event.

Barbara describes a different response to her creative expression.

I do find, not cooking because I have to get dinner on the table, but cooking when I want to, incredibly relaxing. I'll stay up until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. And I'll just go to bed and I just feel great.

Barbara relaxes during her creative expression of cooking and consequently experiences feeling energized, yet, ready to sleep. Barbara also describes that when she is cooking in her kitchen, "it feels good. I feel warm." She is referring, here, to her comfort and contentment when she is in her creative world.

Both Barbara and Lisa experience a feeling of relaxation when they are expressing themselves creatively. For Barbara this relaxation is energizing and for Lisa this relaxation is exhausting. The common aspect of their experiences is that they both experience a feeling of relief from the weight of their significant life events.

For the women in this study, engaging in creative expression means allowing their bodies to respond and allowing their feelings to be expressed. It means to connect with all their senses and feelings and it includes the sensuous nature of that
connection. For some of these women the sensuous connection is experienced through clay work, and for others it is experienced through the feel of paper or pen, the sound of music, the movement of their bodies, the aroma of spices, the sight of colours, the sight and feel of textures, or through the actual or perceived warmth of the artifact.

Lisa explains that working with clay “is just very sensual, that whole feeling of taking whatever is in here and putting it out there and doing it through your hands.” Lisa experiences touching and manipulating the clay with her hands and creating something through that process as being a very sensual act. She feels the sensations in her body as a result of feeling and working with the clay, and also as a result of producing something with her hands. This response is physically, cognitively, and emotionally sensual. Hidden within Carol’s sensual experience of manipulating the clay, is the personal energy that Carol transfers into her pottery. By being open to experiencing the effect of her personal energy on clay, in turn, Lisa’s sensual energy is heightened by allowing herself to be vulnerable within the creative process.

In addition to manipulation of clay, aromas and bodily movement also elicit sensual responses. Barbara explains her sensual experience.

Cooking to me is very sensual. It puts me in a comfortable place, instead of an uncomfortable place. When I’m in my kitchen, I’m very comfortable in my body and in my movements and in my judgments and in my ability to make decisions and do things. I get excited smelling spices. My cooking is a love dance and my cookbook collection is my passion. The aroma of fresh spices is as good as sex.
Barbara's sensual response is elicited by both the aroma of fresh spices and her rhythmic motions of cooking. She describes her cooking and her cookbook collection in passionate terms as if they are part of her being. Her entire creative expression of cooking is her way to connect with her bodily senses and feelings and to express her feelings in a very personal way.

**Responding in depth and degree.** There exists a depth to the bodily responses of these women within their creative expression. Their responses are so deeply internal that these women often use metaphorical language to get as close as possible to describing its powerful impact. Isis describes her bodily response to music:

> I feel music in the centre of my being. It's like, imagine the sound waves filtering through all my senses and the body and everything and going down and touching my soul and rippling like a rock thrown into a pond. It moves me. It changes me. It's something. Songs touch me somehow. I feel it. I live it. Songs become a part of me.

Music, for Isis, touches the depth of her soul in such a dramatic fashion that it effects changes in her. It is music that enables Isis to discover new life in herself. She lives her music as it becomes part of her life and of her world.

It is common for the women in this study to describe that they deal with their significant life events by connecting deeply with themselves. This connection is a powerful experience for these women. Barbara explains her movement from one kind of creative expression to another, with a simultaneous increase in the intensity of the emotional impact on her.

Cooking is a time to start the process in my head and not let it fester. And on occasion, I write. The writing comes long after the cooking. When my aunt died of cancer about nine years ago, I thought and
thought and thought about it for the longest time. Three years later, I just sat down one night and just tears. And tears and tears and tears. And I wrote the most amazing thing. The absolute most amazing tribute to my aunt. Writing is my need to finally, finally, finish fussing over whatever is bothering me, to work that out. Anything I write rips it out of me. Just rips it out of me. It’s just really highly emotional stuff. When I do write something, it’s powerful. I don’t write just for the sake of writing. It’s a very, very, cathartic, final experience.

Cooking, for Barbara, is the key creative expression with which she starts to process her significant life event in her head. This processing is her way of dealing with her emotions so that they do not unconsciously eat away at her. Eventually she takes her creative expression to a much deeper level. When Barbara writes about a significant life event, her aunt dying of cancer, she experiences that rather than merely thinking about her emotions, through writing her emotions are ripped out of her in a profoundly painful way. Barbara connects with her emotions and ultimately with herself. She discovers herself as she has not previously known herself and she comes to terms with her significant life event.

These women describe linkages between their physical senses, emotional feelings, and creative expression. These linkages enable the women to connect deeply with themselves. Penny describes the link she experiences between her vision, touch, and creative expression.

I just love touching the paper and looking at the blank page. I love starting with a clean slate and creating something from that. I really like getting into the writing itself and trying to express myself. It’s not a duty, it’s a joy. Putting pen to paper is most significant for me. The next significance is being able to talk to the page. The whole choice of actually putting pen to paper and not sitting at a computer, or using a pencil and printing, is important to me. The whole style of actually writing and scribbling is important.
I like certain pens. That type of thing was definitely part of what I was doing. If I didn't have the right pen it could disturb the whole process. I can certainly pick up pens and even ink markers and know right away if it's going to be one that I will enjoy writing with or not. During my journalling, I discovered a type of pen that was more like a marker, a fine tip marker because it has to be fairly fine. But I chose colours. I had pinks and purples and blues and reds and I would write with them until they were done. As I started to get back into the poetry it was more just the pen that felt good and that it would write smoothly. I got away from those colours and stayed with blue ink. I think the colours might have been part of the expression. It was as close to painting as I could get at that point. Going back to blue for the poetry, the creativity was in the poetry itself. Whereas, in the journalling, the whole essence of the journalling was, if I could have painted it out I would have done so. But I could write it.

With poetry I would go back and I would correct and I would change and I would do things to what I had written. So I was doing something in making a poem. The journalling, I never went back. If I'd had huge canvasses, I think some of those times, I would have actually just thrown paint on a wall. In a way, it was like that only it was very small, very private, very quiet, and in a confined space where nobody really knew what I was doing.

The combination of Penny's kinesthetic response to the paper, together with her visual response to the blank page and colours of ink are strongly linked to her creative expression. Penny not only connects with her internal responses to her creative expression, she discovers new meaning within her responses. Penny is not merely writing on the blank page. She is communicating with the page as if it has human qualities. The blank page is, to Penny, the clean slate where she can place fresh, creative thoughts down in print and view them uncluttered and unaffected by other writing. She experiences a joyful energy in being able to express herself visually on a paper surface. The colours of ink and the poetry itself are the creative aspects of her journey that are meaningful to her. Penny experiences three processes are relevant and meaningful to her creative expression within the context
of her significant life event: (a) journalling and poetry-writing themselves, (b) the actual feel of the paper and pens, and (c) the visual stimuli of various colors of pen on paper. She likens her journalling to a miniature version of painting on a huge canvas. She chooses to express herself privately in her journal, however if she chooses to express herself in a more public way she could just as easily throw colours of paint on a wall.

The notion of creatively expressing oneself with expansive movements and on large surfaces is connected with the physical release of energy. These women talk about having chapters upon chapters of stories that they could tell about their significant life events and about their personal worlds. Lisa relates the size of her creative expression to the amount she has to say in her stories about her significant life event.

I did one cow picture that’s so big I couldn’t have brought it. It’s like my arms, both my arms this wide [outstretched] and there’s great big cows and there’s sunflowers behind it. I did it on cardboard, too, because that was the only thing I had that was big enough. And even when I finished I thought, “Oh. This needs to be bigger.” So one day, who knows, I may just paint the whole wall in the house. It is a release. It is free. But then at the same time I think, “This is not big enough.” This needs to be bigger. It’s not big enough. I get that with my pottery, too. I don’t know if it’s because I want it to say more or I need to say more. Obviously, I think I have more to say and I’m probably not saying enough of it because I want it to be bigger.

Though Lisa experiences a release and freedom from her creative expression, even when it is on a large surface, she experiences a strong sense that her expression is not full enough or complete. She is holding thoughts and feelings inside that are pushing to be released and she senses this need in her creative expression. Through her creative expressive process, Lisa connects with the
intensity of her personal need to express her thoughts and feelings. Though she can control the size of her work, she cannot contain her feelings that she wants her creative expression to say more of what she needs to say. The life within her stories is pushing to be revealed.

Relating with the female self and with others. The stories that these women tell are reflective of their experiences of being female. Their relationships with their female selves woven together with their significant life events and with their responses to their medium of creative expression, is the essence of their creative expressions.

Previously, I described Lisa's sensual response to the touch and manipulation of clay. For Susan, touch is related to her feminine self. Because she becomes one with her hand-made quilts, those quilts express her femininity and in turn when she wraps herself in them, her femininity is enhanced through her overall connection with her quilts. Susan explains this connection. (See Appendix E 6)

I feel all my quilts are very feminine, especially the hand-sewn ones. I found that when I was house-sitting, I had to do male things. I had to shovel the driveway and I had to take the garbage out. The power would go out or one of the breakers would go and I'd have to go out to the garage and figure out which one it is. That is something that my father did all the time. So that was a male thing. I found that I would wrap up in one particular quilt. It was a water-colour log cabin design and it was a field of roses. I would wrap up in my feminine quilt, my field of roses.

Susan's physical closeness to her hand-sewn quilts, especially one she considers to be very feminine, brings her in touch with her own femininity. She

6 Susan's quilt, "A Field of Roses"
needs this connection with what she feels to be a feminine world, her field of roses, in order to off-set the seemingly male roles that are part of her isolated setting.

Lisa relates her femininity to creation of life. Because of her miscarriage, she doubted her ability to create life in the future. She describes her experience of working with clay.

It was significant to me to be able to manipulate the clay which is from the earth and get back in touch with almost a feminine side. What I found myself obsessing with was the reassurance that I could still create something and that there still was life growing inside of me and coming out of me. Because after the miscarriage, I felt numb or dead. In my eyes, pottery was creating life even though it’s art.

Producing something from the manipulation of earth is a strong reassurance, for Lisa, that as a female she is still capable of producing life, that she still possesses feminine qualities even after having a miscarriage. Lisa needs the reassurance that she is still a woman. By creating her pottery, Lisa reconnects with herself as a woman.

Susan describes the warm, personal, and loving connection that her quilts create between herself and real or hoped for loved ones. Her connection with herself is reinforced by her connection with others.

When I was house-sitting, I walked in the door and turned on the television and that was my company. I needed to keep warm and I think part of that was being alone, nobody to come home and give you a big hug and say “Oh you had a bad day.” People would come over and they would never complain about it being cold, but I always felt that it was cold. In a way, my quilts are the big hug because somebody who I really love and admire taught me how to do them. Each year I returned to house-sitting, my quilting was to fill the loneliness and to bring back the warm feeling that I had when I lived with my friends.
Susan experiences her quilts as providing warmth within her lonely and seemingly cold atmosphere. The warmth she experiences from her quilts is a way for her to connect to people from her past and to take the place of companionship and a family environment that is missing in her isolated setting. Susan explains that it is not the making of her quilts when she is house-sitting that is most important to her, but the warmth and love she experiences from her completed quilts and the memories and meanings that are sewn within each and every quilt.

I see these quilts that I’m making as something that I can hand down to my children. Something that I can, if I have a baby, wrap my baby up in because it’s part of me and part of me can keep my child warm. Susan sees her quilts as a way to create an everlasting connection with her future family, a warm, caring connection that elicits reciprocal feelings of warmth and belonging in Susan. This response is in stark contrast to her feelings of isolation when she is house-sitting. The warmth that Susan feels from her quilts, both in their personal meaning and in their coziness, is the means by which Susan connects with and comforts herself during her significant life event.

The nature of the creative expression in which these women engage elicits physical sensations and emotional feelings that reach seemingly to the depth of their hearts and souls. Their creative expression and their bodies enter into a sense of oneness where their creative expression becomes the catalyst to lessen the pain of their significant life events. Earlier in this chapter I described the notion of the women allowing themselves to be vulnerable within the creative expressive process. They respond to that vulnerability through sensuous connections with their creative expression and with themselves. They become one with their creative expression
such that their creative expression affects changes in themselves as women.

Through their creative expressive process these women achieve a new, close relationship with themselves and with others whom they consider to be important in their lives.

Externalizing Thoughts and Feelings

These women come to value themselves and, ultimately, to experience a deep connection with themselves by trusting, respecting, and allowing themselves the freedom to be vulnerable within their creative expression. By externally expressing their thoughts and feelings in their creative expression, these women make personal connections with themselves and discover who they are as women. They express the pain and experiences of their significant life events in a tangible form that is visible and felt by their bodies.

Lisa says, “Maybe not talking about it makes it come out in other ways. I deal with whatever happened by creating these shapes instead of talking about it.” Lisa is initially reluctant to talk about her miscarriage. Instead, through engaging in pottery, her experiences emerge in the shapes she makes in her pottery as if her experiences need an avenue of release other than verbal means.

Lisa tells her story of how she feels when she externalizes her pain and experience.

I may not be able to verbally articulate what’s happening and how I feel. In my pottery, I can deal with it and I get it out and I feel relief or satisfaction or something going, “Yes! Yes! That’s what it is!” Even though I can’t say it, that’s what it looks like to me. The way it looks is how I feel or it’s coming out of me in some way.

Once Lisa sees her creative expression she recognizes her feelings, and her
thoughts are given a sense of clarity. She may not be able to verbalize her pain and experiences, however, when she can externalize them in her pottery she can deal with them and she feels relieved of the load she is bearing. This relief is not an escape from significant life events as I described earlier but, rather, externalizing her thoughts and feelings makes them real to her and easier to understand. She embodies her internal pain and experiences in her creative expression.

By externalizing their pain and experiences in their creative expression, the women in this study capture their thoughts in a tangible form. Their thoughts are then real and their significant life events make sense over time.

Penny relates the importance of her creative expression to her ability to acknowledge her thoughts.

It was too easy for my thoughts to skitter across my mind and not ever acknowledge them if I didn't put them on paper. But when I put them on paper, even though I didn't re-read them, I had put them down.

By externalizing her thoughts in the form of words on paper, Penny makes her thoughts real. Her thoughts are no longer ungrounded in her head but, instead, have form and she sees them and knows they will remain intact. She can, if she wants, read them at any time. Even if her externalized thoughts should be destroyed, Penny's recollection of those thoughts will have strengthened and will remain with her far into the future.

Healing Through Self-Reflection

For the women in this study, self-reflection plays an important role in the creative process. Self-reflection enables these women to come to deep understandings of themselves, their life experiences, and their significant life events.
This deep understanding is a catalyst for these women to heal from the impact of their significant life events. They tell their stories of internal and external self-reflection and healing. To these women, healing has occurred when their internal wounds no longer feel painful and no longer consume their lives.

Penny describes extending her self-reflection from her psychotherapy to her journalling.

It was as if talking to the therapist over and over again. I was able to continue the conversations I had in therapy by writing them out through the journal. Once I stopped psychotherapy, I was able to go on with the journalling and I was progressing.

She engages in journalling as an external medium through which to express her thoughts on an ongoing basis and to extend her verbal expression beyond when psychotherapy ends. Her journalling enables her to move beyond the place she reached in psychotherapy and to move closer toward feeling healed from the impact of her significant life event.

In contrast with Penny’s experience of externally expressing herself in her journal, Isis explains that her experience of working internally to express her thoughts and feelings is, to her, creative expression.

I consider hypnosis work and imagery to very much be creative expression because it is so open ended. The therapist guides me, initially, but I make it. Out in the wilderness is a bit of a clearing and a pile of boulders. A humongous pile of boulders that’s a story and a half high. Beside the pile of boulders is a sledge hammer that fits perfectly into my hand. It’s got my name on it. It’s mine. The ease with which I can swing this sledge hammer is just incredible. I don’t get tired using it. Nothing. When I’m angry, I go to the top of the mound and I project whatever it is I’m angry about onto the rocks and then I smash the hell out of it. It is such a relief. It’s like if you’ve got a sore and you want to get all the puss out that you can, to express it. That’s what I feel like I’m doing. WAAH! Getting it out of me. All the while I would be sitting in
a chair, ever so still and peaceful, yet I am expressing all this anger in my mind’s eye.

Isis experiences relief from internally working out her anger or other emotions as if she is physically involved in working out her feelings. Though she is working internally in a self-reflective way, Isis is expressing her thoughts and emotions within her imagination just like she does when she externalizes her thoughts and feelings in, for example, her music, as discussed earlier. Isis creates visual images of the rock pile and sledge hammer that are as real to her as if she had created them in real life. She experiences the same kind of relief as described earlier by Lisa. Isis’ relief is attained through internal self-reflection whereas Lisa’s relief is achieved through self-reflection during pottery.

Isis describes being self-reflective when she is journalling.

I do the same with journalling. It’s very much internal though I am physically involved in the sense that it’s being written out. But when my second relationship died I couldn’t even journal for awhile. I could not write as fast as I was thinking and so I would sit with the binder open and the pen in my hand and stare out the window and journal in my head, have the conversation in my head.

Isis describes that she can express her thoughts on paper only when her thoughts slow enough to be captured in print. Whether or not she writes her thoughts down, Isis expresses the pain of her significant life event in an actual or imaginary journal. For these women, creative expression that is meaningful to them does not exist without self-reflection.

Creating artifacts or expressing oneself in other ways, for example through singing, is more than mere externalizing. Creative expression takes externalizing of
pain and difficult experiences to a level of healing. Isis tells her story of healing through externalizing her significant life event.

I wrote a really nice song about my pain and I played it over and over and over again. Other people would listen to it and like it and they didn't have a clue where it came from in my life. But it got it out of me. It got it outside of me and helped me to put the rest of my life in perspective. That my life wasn't just this pile of pain that I didn't know what to do with. By saying it out loud in my songs and journal, it has some kind of meaning and it releases some kind of energy. Somehow, getting a distance from it helped me to handle it, to heal it.

It is as if the pain covers all aspects of Isis' life and alters how she views not only her significant life event, but, her whole world. Externalizing her pain releases the negative energy of her significant life event and contributes to her healing. By externalizing her pain, Isis' pain becomes meaningful to her; she can better understand its affect on her compared with if she keeps her pain inside. Through engaging in creative expression, the shards of Isis' life soften, become less emotionally painful, and heal. Isis describes that she feels a distance between herself and her pain when she expresses her pain in songs or journals. This distance helps Isis see and experience her pain in a new way and, ultimately, helps her to clearly see toward her future. Her pain becomes part of her history. It no longer consumes her every thought and no longer is the source of all her feelings. Her significant life event no longer consumes her life.

Lisa adds further understanding to the concept of externalizing, in her story of one of her clay pieces. (See Appendix E )

I can't part with one particular clay piece because there is so much feeling about it. It was one of the first ones that came with the belly

7 Lisa's clay piece with outside decoration
shape and I played with the clay around the outside as decoration. This piece tells me that things do not necessarily always go on inside but things happen outside as well. It's okay to have things going on, on the outside. I don't always have to be keeping things boxed in and closed.

Lisa realizes that her pottery reflects her life. If she can accept external decorations in her pottery, then Lisa accepts that she has the power to give herself permission to externalize her pain and experiences. By engaging in creative expression, Lisa understands that there is a healthy option beyond keeping her pain and experiences locked up tight and hidden from herself and others. The healthy option is to allow herself to externally express her thoughts and feelings in her pottery.

These women tell their stories of experiencing the reflection of their significant life events and of the personal pain of those events in their external expression. They experience a close relationship with their creative expression to which no one else can relate and understand in the same in-depth way. Isis talks about how her experience of her paintings and other's experience of her artwork, differ. "People look at my paintings and everybody sees something different in it, but I see me. I see what is important to me and that's what I put into it. It feels so good to let that out." The deep meaning of Isis' pain is only obvious to her. Isis' paintings are a reflection of herself and her self-reflection is an important part of her healing.

Self-reflection and the external expression of their emotional pain come together in these women's stories of healing from their significant life events. They talk about this convergence being a moment of self-discovery and of coming to a new understanding of themselves.
Penny tells her story of writing herself out of a suicide attempt.

When I went through a drug withdrawal from an antidepressant, I wrote one last poem and that poem saved my life. It's not a very nice poem; it's not anything special. I was as close to committing suicide as I ever want to get. I started at the top of a page and wrote until that feeling passed. It wasn't the poem, it was that I kept trying to think. Because I was writing in rhyme, I had to keep rhyming, I had to keep thinking, and I had to keep putting it on the paper. As I wrote, I thought about other things and I stopped thinking about the pills that I had handy and what I could do with them. I started to think more about what I was doing, what I was writing. By the time I had reached the end of that poem I had actually passed the point where I was going to swallow the pills.

It was very close. It was very powerful. I wasn't thinking when I started the poem. I had been crying for hours and I had been depressed all day and not really knowing why. And it was withdrawal, it was simply withdrawal. Once I was able to start writing and get past the crying and concentrate on something else, I was able to start thinking about what was going on. It just really suddenly became clear that this wasn't what I wanted to do.

Penny's story connects the process of writing and rhyming, her intention to swallow enough pills to commit suicide, and her sudden realization that she does not want to commit suicide. Penny's creative process of writing and rhyming is coupled with her self-reflection and external expression of her thoughts and feelings as she passes through a momentous time in her life. Through writing and rhyming and self-reflection, Penny sees herself and her world in an entirely new way and she re-identifies what she wants out of life. This moment of self-discovery reflects her passage toward self-healing when her significant life event no longer consumes her life.

The other women share the experience of a moment of self-discovery. The sharpness of those moments vary from woman to woman. However, these women
can each describe important creative expressive experiences when their thinking about their significant life events shifts toward self-healing.

The type of external expression in which the women choose to engage, varies in a transitional way. It is as if the type of creative expression is dependent on the depth of these women’s self-reflection and on the process of placing their pain outside of themselves. Isis explains, “There was still some journalling going on but there was a kind of a transition. It was almost like the music became the journalling and the journalling shifted into writing songs.” It is not as if the various types of creative expression are totally separate. Instead, Isis experiences them as evolving from one to another as if extensions of each other. Yet, each type of creative expression has its creative place and serves its particular purpose within the women’s self-reflection and healing.

For these women, self-reflection and external expression are about making sense of their significant life events and discovering meaning in their struggle to move beyond their emotional pain. Isis tells her story of making sense and finding meaning within her significant life event.

In trying to make sense of it all, I began to journal. Originally the journalling focused much more around conversations with God. There has to be a reason why this is happening. There has to be something in it that I need to learn. There has to be some way for me to come out of it a better person, a stronger person and that it has some meaning. It has to make some sense somewhere.

Isis turns to journalling in order to understand her significant life event. She is drawn to make sense of why her partner left their relationship and, in turn, focuses her writings on God. Isis not only focuses on making sense of her significant life
event but on gaining meaning from the struggle to move forward in her life.

Self-reflection, external expression, sense-making, and discovering meaning are the cornerstones for Isis to heal from her emotional pain and to connect with herself in a new way. This experience is freeing and, thus, healing for Isis.

**Conclusion**

The women in this study describe the critical necessity of creative expression in their lives. Not only do they experience being spontaneously drawn toward or repelled from various forms of expression, there are times that their creative experience is an escape into a safe place where they are in control of their expression.

They describe coming to trust and respect themselves and the creative expressive process, and they also describe giving themselves permission to engage in and to be vulnerable within the creative process. In essence these women come to value themselves. A variety of physical sensations and emotional feelings are elicited by their expression, including the feeling of detachment, as these women engage in a process of self-reflection and internal and external creative expression. Through self-reflection during the creative experience, they achieve deep understanding of and a connection with themselves as women and of their worlds. They tap into a unique source of energy and new life within themselves. By engaging in creative expression, these women make sense of their significant life events, discover new meaning within their bodily responses to the creative process, and experience relief from the weight of their significant life events. The women in
this study experience moments of self-discovery that reflect self-healing. There comes a time when their significant life events no longer consume their lives.
CHAPTER 6

Rebirth of Self: Creating New Worlds

The women in this study describe their creative expression as the catalyst for them to experience a transition in their lives and a rebirth of themselves as important people. They no longer experience a silencing of themselves and of their voices. They tell stories of a shift from feelings that include hopelessness when they experience being under the control of their significant life events, to feelings that include hopefulness as they gain control of their own lives.

During their creative expressive experiences, they come to a place on their journeys of self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others who have had an impact on their lives. They discover that self-validation and other-validation both have a role in the rebirth of themselves. These women come to know themselves and to accept their body images as they come to experience themselves as unique and capable people no matter how they might appear to others. In the process of giving themselves permission to engage in creative expression these women experience a critical shift in nurturance. Previously, in their many life roles, they often adopted the position of nurturing others in order to nurture themselves. However, by engaging in creative expression, they discover a freedom to empower their own positive voices within the world of voices. Upon experiencing this freedom, the women shift their nurturing focus toward nurturing themselves in order to nurture others.

These women come to see possibilities that far outreach the inner turmoil they experience when overpowered by circumstances in their lives and by their significant life events. They see themselves and their worlds differently, through new
lenses of meaning. Ultimately, during their creative expressive experiences their new selves emerge and they begin to live their lives differently within seemingly new worlds.

In this chapter, I will tell the stories of these women’s experiences of a transition of themselves and of the creation of their new personal worlds. They not only see themselves and their worlds differently than in the past when they were overpowered by their significant life events, they make significant changes in themselves and in their worlds. They act differently, their views of their worlds change, and in essence their worlds are viewed as new worlds.

**Experiencing a Shift in Control**

In Chapter 5, I described the women’s experiences of escaping from their significant life events into, for example, their music, quilting, or pottery. The women give themselves permission to engage in creative expression and to be vulnerable within the creative process. In this chapter the women tell their stories of experiencing a transition within themselves. They talk about a shift in control from their significant life events to themselves. This shift in control yields a shift in the women from feeling hopeless and helpless to feeling hopeful, empowered, energized, and free.

Carol tells her story of feeling as if her depression has more power over her than she does over herself.

I had this overwhelming emotional stuff that I just couldn’t process. I was totally overwhelmed by the negativity of it. I’m a very optimistic person by nature. I’m pretty happy, easy going, but I just didn’t know what to do with all this stuff. I just didn’t have a clue and the more it went around and around in my brain, the worse it got. I was very
explosive. I had a tendency to blow up over missing the school bus or just really dumb stuff. I look back on it now and I think, “Oh Lord, my kids must have thought I was crazy!” Actually, in a way, at that time, maybe I did feel a little bit crazy.

I guess the negativity around this event came from the fact that I was very clear about where I was and what I could handle, what my coping limits were, where I wanted to be at that time. I had wanted to go back to school for several years by this point. Having a significant other person not validate that and just go, “You can handle it.” Well thanks for the vote of confidence but I’m not interested in handling it. I do not want to hang on for the next 20 years by my fingernails. I want to enjoy my life. I want to enjoy my children. So, this event to me was very, almost symbolic of me not being in control, not having a voice. For a person of my personality, that really isn’t the most comfortable place to be.

Postpartum depression for Carol is an experience of powerlessness and of being silenced. Along with the depression, Carol’s significant other and her interpretation of her family responsibilities give the strong message that her own life goals come second after caring for her family. She feels oppressed in her world. Carol fights her powerlessness and fights to re-connect with life goals that she had made before her significant life event.

Once these women engage in their creative expression they move to gaining control over their emotional pain and over their lives. This shift in control for some of the women is subtle and gradual, and for others, is sudden. The shift, itself, is what is most important because it reflects significant changes in these women.

Barbara tells her story of her cooking being the means for her to be in control of herself.

When I’m in my kitchen cooking, I make decisions like, should it be this? Should it be that? And I’m usually right. That makes me feel good about myself. It’s that need to be alone. Alone with my thoughts. I need to process and think. I’m constantly looking for meaning in my
neighbour's life. I would say to myself, "Why me?" "Why did she move in next door to me?" If I don't take time to reflect on what happened and learn and become a better person, then what was the point of all of it. It was obviously out of my control that she was terminally ill.

But I believe that I've become a better person. I know more. I understand more. I feel differently about different things. I got involved with the Hospice House. I've decided that next fall, I'm going to take the training and go do some volunteering there, probably in the kitchen cooking for everybody!

By engaging in cooking, Barbara slowly comes to terms with the loss of her neighbour's friendship and with her neighbour's death. She gains control over her significant life event as she gradually learns and grows as a person. Barbara feels comfortable when she cooks, and her time alone in her kitchen allows her time to think and process her thoughts related to her neighbour's death. By engaging in her cooking, she feels free to move forward in her life.

Some women experience a sudden change from feeling engulfed by their significant events to having control over their significant life events. With the re-appearance of music in her life following her choice of not attempting suicide again, Isis describes her sudden realization of self-control.

Whatever has happened up until this point in my life, that's over. That's the past. From now on it's going to be like this. Now I'm in charge of my own life and I'm going to put it all back together and I'm going to make it work for me and it's my responsibility now.

Isis is very clear that she is taking responsibility to make changes in her life. She is, now, not only in control of herself and her significant life event, Isis experiences being in control of her life. She is establishing control of how her life is going to be and that the past will not negatively affect her decisions. Whether the shift in control from the women's significant life events to themselves is slow or
sudden, or any speed in-between, is immaterial. What is important is that with this shift in control, the women no longer are oppressed but, instead, are empowered to change their lives.

**Experiencing a Transition and Rebirth of Self**

Simultaneously, and within the shift in control, another phenomenon occurs. The women in this study are experiencing a transition of themselves and are ultimately living their own rebirth. This rebirth is not subtle but rather is a dramatic change of self.

Isis explains that when music re-appeared in her life after her suicide attempt, "It was like being reborn. And it was very metaphysically what was happening to me. It starts an entirely new journey. It ends one and starts another." For Isis, the lack of music in her life is significant. When music appears again in her life, she experiences feeling as if she is reborn on a new life journey.

The very nature of the experience of a transition requires that the women give themselves permission to meet their own needs. In Chapter 4, I described Carol's transition from meeting her family's needs to meeting her own needs, but not before giving herself permission to take time for and to engage in painting and sculpture. Carol's life transition is evident in her watercolour triptych that I describe later in this chapter and that depicts her transition as a woman. By meeting their personal needs, these women become free to enter into a life transition. Without giving themselves permission, these women do not freely engage in the creative expressive process thereby extinguishing the catalyst that gives possibility to their transition and, ultimately, to their rebirth.
Giving Self Permission to Change

These women move from a position of putting themselves last, and essentially losing or coming close to losing their self-worth, to putting themselves first so that they are better able to meet their needs and those of others.

Penny talks about giving herself permission to meet her own needs.

At the point in my life that this was all going on, I was very unfamiliar with that concept of being able to do anything for myself. I came dead last. Whatever I did I came last. To take the time out and actually give myself permission to do something that was just for me was freeing in itself. I think that’s part and parcel of being able to take the steps forward that were for me. To be able to not hear all the voices of condemnation saying, “You shouldn’t be doing this” and there was my own voice in there, too. So I was even silencing my own voice when I did that.

While I haven’t done much [creative expression] in the past few months, it’s something I’m still exploring and I still intend to do, and that I’ve given myself permission to do something just for me. There were a lot of points in my life where creativity was just a waste of time. I spent 20 years in a marriage where doing anything other than the day-to-day living and working, to do something for myself, was a waste of time.

Penny is making the transition from putting herself last to putting herself first in relation to her creative expression. Giving herself permission to engage in creative expression requires that she silence both her own and others’ voices that tell her that her needs are unimportant and that creative expression belongs in last place in life priorities. Penny is experiencing a transition in her life that includes the confidence to leave her marriage, as a result of the freedom she feels from giving herself permission to meet personal needs.

Forgiving Self and Others

An important part of giving self permission to change is forgiving others,
together with forgiving self. Isis tells her story of forgiving herself and others.

I got to suffer the consequences of my parents not doing a good enough job. I got left with the mess to fix and put back together and figure out. So there was a fair amount of anger for awhile. The journalling, the meditating, the writing songs got the anger outside of me. Then I thought “If I’m doing the best I can for where I’m at on my journey, then they were probably doing the best that they could.

And as I looked back into my family history, my father came from an alcoholic parent, my mother came from an alcoholic parent. There were already dysfunctional familial behaviours that just got passed on. So in a lot of ways it’s really not their fault. They did the best they could. And so there was a lot of forgiveness, then.

Forgiveness of her parents is made possible for Isis by engaging in the creative expressive process. By journalling, meditation, and song-writing, Isis achieves this forgiveness by moving her anger outside of herself, and coming to an understanding that it really is not a fault of her parents that alcoholism strongly affected their abilities to parent her. Once she forgives her parents, Isis is free to give herself permission to change.

Isis continues on to tell her story about the importance of forgiving herself. She experiences a transition within herself because of self-forgiveness.

The refrain of my song ["We Are Free"] was very much about the choice that I made to live. Life can be hard, you can feel an awful lot of pain, but you can make the choice to live and that’s the choice I made. I really worked something out about that whole thing. And somehow I worked out forgiveness for myself.

Isis explains that she works out the pain in her life and in so doing, she not only makes the choice to live instead of committing suicide, she comes to forgive herself for previously attempting suicide. By forgiving herself, she can move on in
her life. The transition Isis experiences encompasses a rebirth. She gives herself permission to choose a new life course and, ultimately, a new life.

Validating Self

The women in this study experience a transition of self that includes validating who they are and what they need in life. Carol tells about the importance of validating herself. “The thing that becomes the largest factor for me is that sense of inner strength that comes when an individual can just validate really who they are. That was really the crux of it for me.” By validating herself, Carol experiences greater strength as a person, inner strength that empowers her to be herself, to know and accept every part of herself, and to experience herself as a new and capable woman.

Lisa shares her story of the relationship between validating her creative expression and validating herself.

What comes to mind for me is self-conscious intimidation where it would be easier to work on my own at home and do my own little thing because then I wouldn’t have to worry about somebody thinking, “Oh my God. She’s making a piece of crap. I can’t believe she’s doing that,” and getting past that feeling.

So being able to take that step and think, “If it’s a piece of crap it’s mine and that’s it. If nobody likes it then that’s just too bad.” And being able to break out of that mold and know that my expression and what I have to say is just as valid as anyone else’s. No matter what. People don’t always agree with whatever I say in life. People aren’t always going to agree with my taste. People might not like my sofa, but I like it. That kind of thing.

It was also a confidence in knowing that even though it may not be the best in the whole wide world, it was good for me. And knowing I could still do my pottery in front of other people. Being able to know that my feelings were okay and that it was okay to be going through whatever I was going through or okay to have the sadness. If I was feeling really
sad that day or whatever. To know that it wasn’t a bad thing and I shouldn’t feel guilty for it. It was just the way it was. It was a huge transition time for me.

It’s given me the confidence to know that things are going to be okay. That I’m okay and that I’m capable of doing anything. Really. And that it may not be acceptable to everyone’s tastes, but that’s okay.

Lisa experiences a major transition in her life when she reaches the place on her journey of validating her creative expression and validating herself. She is more comfortable engaging in creative expression at home where she does not feel self-conscious and intimidated by other’s thoughts or comments. However, Lisa experiences growth in her ability to break out of her comfort zone, to accept her own creative expression, and not be influenced by other’s impressions of her work. By engaging in and validating her own creative expression, Lisa experiences increased self-confidence in her abilities. No matter what she is feeling, she gives herself permission to feel. The societal norms of what is acceptable to feel and feelings that are acceptable to show, are not what is important. It is valid and acceptable for Lisa to feel whatever she feels. Once Lisa thinks in this new way, she experiences a huge transition in her life and a new-found strength in understanding and accepting her entire self. In contrast to Lisa barely having the inner strength to join a group of creative expressive women in pottery classes, she now talks about her self-confidence being lifted because of her creative expressive experience. Lisa comes to know she is capable of anything in her future life.

Accepting Self

Carol’s and Lisa’s significant life events involve body image issues. For these
two women, body image emerges as an important entity within their creative
expression and as an important underlying theme in the rebirth of themselves. Lisa
describes that by engaging in pottery, she comes to accept her own body image
especially when her pottery takes on the form of being wider at the bottom with arms
at the side that curl inward. (See Appendix E ⁸)

Here I am bellied on the bottom and I've got these arms that are
steadfast, confident, not aggressive finger shaking kind of thing but
getting there. I am coming to terms with getting older and I’m also
coming to terms with my body image and accepting I’m not going to be
a size six. I never will be and no matter how hard I try and even if I
never eat again, I probably will never be a size six. It’s just not going to
happen. I have hips and that’s probably what this bottom heavy piece
is. It’s a matter of accepting myself and my body and its limitations and
it’s not being limited to things, and that it’s healthy and stable. The
heaviness on the bottom of this pottery is sturdy. It’s not going to fall
over. That’s a good thing. If I was the other way around, I wouldn’t
have my feet on the ground. I would be tipsy turvy and not very strong.

Lisa experiences her body image in her pottery. She has come to accept that
her body image has positive qualities such as being steadfast, confident, stable,
sturdy, grounded, and strong. During her creative expression, she sees herself in a
new, positive light, and accepts the body image she sees. Ultimately, Lisa’s
transition involves giving herself permission to accept who she has been all along.

Carol’s experience includes a blend of both self-validation and accepting her
own body image. Added to that couplet, for Carol, is the continued value of being
validated by others. Carol describes this blend of factors. (See Appendix E ⁹)

One of the very first pieces that I did was a triptych. Each painting was
about two inches by three inches tall of female nudes. One with her
back to the viewer, one with her side to the viewer, and one full front in

⁸ Lisa’s clay belly shape with arms
⁹ Carol’s triptych
which the light was very different. The style was very different. They went from very heavy to very light. And that was very much, for me, very illustrative of where I was going from. Going from sad and lonely and hurt to, this is who I am and I’m beautiful and you can like it or not like it, but your judgment of me isn’t going to affect my judgment of myself.

So that was huge. Most people who take up a new medium (I had never painted in watercolour before) generally don’t go to human form first. They just don’t. It’s very challenging. It was beautiful. It was just a beautiful piece and I realized, in the subject matter that I was choosing, how important it was becoming.

In our first watercolour exhibit, we had fruits and cats and petunias and landscapes with fields of flowers, then we had not one, but a total of four nudes all done by me. And to put that out into what I perceive to be a very conservative Catholic community, because that’s who saw this first exhibit, that was huge. That was huge. And I’m sure it was very revealing of where I was personally. Because, of course, having been pregnant and obesity has always been a really big thing for me as well, so the body issues were huge at that time. I was very introspective. I was constantly criticizing myself and analyzing where I was and what I was doing here and how was my art reflecting back on my community and on my family and those kinds of things. So that’s why it was so big for me to be able to go, “Oh, this is my truth. Like it or leave it. You can have it or not have it. It doesn’t matter.”

And then, to have somebody put their money where their mouth is and actually buy a piece of it was just, for somebody who has always taken that issue of validation from an outside source as very important, that was huge. Because if a stranger would buy my work then that must mean it’s worth something. So that was a big one, too.

Carol’s watercolour triptych is in stark contrast to others’ creative expression in an exhibit and, yet, for Carol it represents a huge step forward in her transition of herself as a woman. By displaying her bodily expression in public within her Catholic community, she validates her body image, her creative expression, and her movement through her significant life event. Outside validation increases Carol’s realization of the tremendous transition she has made as a woman. It is because of
her paintings and people's reactions to them that Carol experiences validation from others. However, she does not paint for the external validation. People's responses to her paintings contribute to her self-validation and to her acceptance of her body image. Similarly to Lisa, Carol experiences an acceptance of herself and a rebirth of herself whom she accepts without judgment. Carol's transition is revealed in her art. In these women's experiences of a transition, both factors, self-validation and validation from others play a critical role in their rebirth.

**Nurturing Self to Nurture Others**

Previously I described the women's experiences of nurturing themselves and of nurturing others. However, these women identify a subtle, yet, important distinction between nurturing themselves by nurturing others, and nurturing themselves to nurture others. In Chapter 4, I described Carol's experience of losing herself as she works to nurture others in her roles as wife, mother, and friend. At the time of her significant life event, the birth of her fifth child, Carol no longer sustains herself by nurturing others and at the same time she seldom engages in creative expression. Once she reclaims her art, she reclaims herself. Carol explains that when she re-engages in creative expression she again experiences being able to nurture herself and, in turn, nurtures her sixth child.

After the fifth child was born, he was about three or four months old, I just wasn't bonding. I nursed him and took care of him, and whatever, but, well, he's dad's kid. You wanted him, he's yours.

When the 16 month old, the sixth child, was born, I did a whole series of very ethereal trees, six or eight of them. The sense of calmness and serenity surrounding my acceptance of this child joining my family, is very evident in that series.
In this example of her transition as a woman, Carol describes the profound change in her ability to bond with her sixth child, compared with her difficulty bonding with her fifth child. She nurtures herself by re-engaging in creative expression and, in so doing, discovers that to nurture herself allows her, once again, to nurture others. The change is evident not only in the nature of Carol’s artwork but also in her acceptance of and bonding with her sixth child. Carol is reborn by the process of reclaiming herself through her art. It is her engagement in creative expression, that is the catalyst for this rebirth of herself to occur.

By nurturing themselves within their creative expression and seeing themselves in their creative expression these women are strengthened as people and their creative voices proclaim their new selves. They experience being reborn as new women stepping out into their new worlds.

Creating New Personal Worlds

Once the women experience a rebirth in themselves, they acquire a new-found energy that motivates them to further create their new personal worlds by engaging in creative expression. This energy is expressed by an empowerment of their voices. Earlier, I told Carol’s story of not having a voice and Penny’s story of silencing her negative voice. In contrast to those stories, Penny tells her story of empowering her voice through creative expression.

As I woke up to the possibilities in my life, I would write about them. I would write about them and they would then become real. Then I would act upon them and then I would act on the next thing and I would write about it and act upon the next. So it was a circle and I don’t know whether writing it down made it real or whether I acted on something and then wrote it down that day and made it real and just made it more positive, but I think it was definitely all connected. I think
if I had just done some of the things that I did actively and not written them down afterwards, they wouldn't have stayed as present as they did. By putting it on paper I solidified it. Whether that would be saying “Yes, I’m going.” And then writing it on paper and saying, “I said, Yes. I’m going.” It would solidify for me that same comment. By writing it down, it made it real. I sort of wrote my world. I wrote myself out of my marriage.

Penny’s journalling and actions to leave her marriage become strongly connected. As this connection strengthens, so does her trust in and respect for the creative process. Penny’s thoughts and feelings appear in her journal and what she writes in her journal appears in her actions. It is the creative process of journalling that enables Penny to empower her positive voice. In an interconnected way, her thoughts, feelings, writing, and actions are parts of a single process. As Penny’s self-awareness increases, she can and does write the reality of her life beyond her marriage.

Susan takes the creation of her world a step farther. She describes her quilting as being the catalyst to a new life.

To begin quilting it was like starting a whole different life. It was finding myself again. Finding my creative process again and starting to think about my future. It’s time to grow up. I was making for my future.

Susan not only describes that quilting enables her to connect with her creative self; the quilting process is her way to think about and plan for her future. Rather than focusing on the loneliness she feels while house-sitting, she focuses on her quilts having a place in her future. She experiences the quilting process as a time to grow up and as a time of transition to a whole new life. Susan’s quilting is the means for her to begin to create her new world.
Isis equates her creative expression to life, and within that life she expresses a freedom of expression as she joins her voice with all voices within the world.

This creative expression that suddenly comes flooding out of me is LIFE! That's what it means. That's what it means to be alive, to make noise, change the scenery, give expression to who I am, to put my energy out into the big pool of everybody's energy that makes the world go around and just be a part of it. That's what being alive is all about. It's not about going to work or having the best whatever. It's being in touch with who I am and being free to express that and knowing that, that's okay. That's what life is.

Isis' voice is empowered by experiencing a freedom to create. Her voice is part of the voices of the world and as she connects with that collective life energy, she empowers her voice through her self-expression. Isis suddenly realizes her place in life and her place in her new world.

The transition that these women describe entails looking at life differently compared with how they viewed their lives prior to and during the time of their significant life events. Earlier I talked about Carol's art revealing her life transition to her. The women experience that their creative expression becomes the lens by which they see meaning in their lives. Just as Isis previously described coming to the realization of her place in her new world, these women see possibilities now, compared with seeing different, or few, if any, possibilities during their significant life events. Their new personal views of their lives are the catalysts for these women to create their new worlds.

In Chapter 5, I referred to Barbara's reference to her cooking as being a "love dance." She is referring to her sensual and passionate responses to aromas and to
her movements in the kitchen. Susan uses a similar term with a different meaning when referring to her view of her future.

My quilts aren't art objects; they are "love objects." I see my future creating, not just blankets of warmth and love, but making art objects. I see a very bright future. I'm trying to get the courage to move back down south.

Susan's reference to love objects is a description of her love that is an inseparable part of her quilts that she sews for people whom she loves and for whom she cares. At the time of the first interview, Susan envisioned that when she is no longer house-sitting in the isolated winter environment, and when she gains the courage to leave her friends and move to the South, she will change from making objects of her love to making objects of art. Susan was envisioning her new personal world.

Three months after the first interview, Susan said:

I've decided to test the waters down south. I'm very excited about my prospects and curious about how my art will reflect this change. I've noticed that as I've made this choice to move south, my quilting has changed. I'm now concentrating on doing small wall hangings. I see these as "art objects" instead of quilting.

Susan is not focusing on her significant life event; her attention is on her future move to the South. Now that she has made her plans to move, Susan's creative expression reflects her new view of her future. Susan sees herself through a new lens of meaning. She is maturing as a woman within her creative expression. The women in this study experience a shift from looking inward at their feelings and experiences of their significant life events and creating from that vantage point, to creating looking outward toward their futures. In the previous two quotations, Susan
describes no longer needing to focus inwardly while involved in creative expression. Her focus is on creating her new personal world. Susan now creates looking outward. As her focus changes she is stronger in her conviction of achieving success in the future. It is also common for the other women to experience a shift from creating looking inward to creating looking outward. This shift results in a change in their creative expression. Instead of their creative expression reflecting their futures with their significant life events, their creative expression becomes a reflection of their hopes and dreams for their futures.

These women experience a fullness in their lives that they had not experienced prior to their significant life events and prior to engaging in creative expression. Carol says, "I consider my life much fuller, much more enjoyable, much more fun, and much more purposeful than I did." She is referring to changes in herself as well as to changes in her creative abilities. Carol describes feeling free and fulfilled within her life compared with how she felt when she was in the depths of her postpartum depression.

Isis explains, "Creative expression helps me reshape, create, and redefine who I am in order to move away from a dark moment in my life, my significant life event." For Isis, it is her creative expression that allows her to see her life differently, and to recreate her life in a whole new way. Isis' creative expression brings the light back into her life. She sees herself reborn with new possibilities.

Conclusion

The women in this study are experiencing numerous changes throughout their creative processes. These changes include a shift in control from their
significant life events to themselves. They experience this shift in control as a lifting of their feelings of hopelessness and oppression. Their voices are no longer silenced. Simultaneously, and within this change in control, these women are experiencing a transition and rebirth of themselves. Ultimately their transition involves giving themselves permission to put themselves first to meet their own needs and, then, to meet other’s needs. Meeting their own needs includes engaging in the creative expressive process, the catalyst that gives possibility to their transition and rebirth. The energy that emerges from their rebirth is reflected in their creative expression and is the source of energy for creating new worlds for themselves.

Amidst all of these changes, their worlds are full of light and possibilities. The women’s creative expression shifts because their perspectives change. When they are in the midst of expressing their significant life events in their creative expression, they create looking inward. As the women experience hopefulness and feelings of empowerment, their perspectives change. They create looking outward and, as a result, both their creative expression and their perspectives on their futures, change. This change is a shift away from the turmoil of their significant life events toward peaceful futures.
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this research was to explore the meaning of women’s everyday experiences with creative expression engaged in at the time of difficulties in their lives. By, everyday, I mean creative expression that occurs outside of a therapeutic setting and that includes self-chosen forms of creative expression. I was drawn to this research because of my own experiences with creative expression and because of anecdotal comments made by others. My experiences with creative expression, and those of others, have affected our lives in an everyday sense without or separate from counselling.

However, this aspect of women’s experiences with creative expression has not been researched. Instead, research focuses on the relationship between counsellor approaches and client cognition, affect, and behaviour. Research also explores the healing qualities and experiences of engaging in creative expression. The everyday experience of engaging in creative expression seems to be taken for granted. It is this taken-for-granted experience that is the focus of this study.

Research Approach

Originally, I designed this research for both male and female participants who had experienced significant life events that they considered to be happy or difficult times in their lives. All the participants who volunteered for this study are women and the significant life events that they initially identified are emotionally painful events. I explored women's worlds as they evolved over time and were changed by their relationship with their creative expression and with themselves. By focusing
entirely on women’s everyday experiences, this research took a turn away from any other research to date on the subject of creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events.

I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because it allows me to explore the nature of experience that exists beyond conscious knowing. Drawing on Heidegger’s works, this philosophical and research approach undercuts the subject-object dichotomy that is the basis of much research, and allows for a focus on the meaning of shared experience. In Chapter 3, I described the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. This approach allowed me to unearth the hidden meaning of the women’s lived experiences and to understand this meaning. I believe that what emerged from analysis of the transcripts was the essence of the women’s experiences of engaging in creative expression while they were living through their emotionally painful significant life events. The essence of their experiences is the deep meaning embodied within these women’s stories (van Manen, 1997).

Van Manen (1997) suggests that interpretation is a mining of meaning that already exists. It is not a creation of new meaning. I strove to be open to whatever meaning should appear whether or not it included healing and I was prepared to search for hidden meaning. Because I began this research thinking that meaning exits only in the creative expressive experience, I became surprised that the women’s creative expression also involved a mining of meaning for themselves beyond the creative experience. By engaging in creative expression within the context of their emotionally painful significant life events, the women gained
understanding of their significant life events and of themselves. They did not speak of creating new meaning, but, rather, that through creative expression they unearthed meaning that was taken-for-granted and hidden within themselves and their experiences, and revealed in their creative expression. They spoke of their creative expression emerging from an unknown source as if it had been present but had gone untapped until they gave themselves permission to experience their personal meaning through their discovery process. By engaging in hermeneutic phenomenological research it became clearly evident to me that these women’s experiences, together, are an expression of what it means for them to engage in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events. It is this collective experience to which I now turn.

**A Shifting Perspective**

In Chapter 4, I metaphorically described the women’s experiences of engaging in creative expression within significant life events, as being on a journey. From that perspective their experiences are revealed as movements within what they see, feel, and live. I presented examples illustrating that as the women took new vantage points, they experienced changes in the ways that they saw their worlds. The women recognized that they began their journeys from times in their lives that were often more harmonious for them than during the time of their significant life events. The women experienced their creative expression as a reflection of their worlds that, at the beginning of their significant life events, did not reflect their emotional pain. By engaging in creative expression during and after their significant life events, they came to see that their creative activities play a major role
in helping them achieve balanced lives. The women's experiences are described as a shift in horizon. By looking inward at the pain of their significant live events and reflecting that pain in their creative expression, the women came to the point where they could see and understand themselves and their significant life events in new ways. The women came to understand that their inward looking creates possibilities for them to look at and experience the world outside themselves. These possibilities include ways they had not envisioned or experienced prior to their significant life events.

It is not merely that the women are looking inward and reflecting that pain in their creative expression. Sutherland's (1999) case study described a woman's experience of art therapy. She experienced herself in a deep way through her art and she expressed that experience in her paintings. In this present study, the women's shifts in horizon are possible by mining the meaning of their significant life events. The women unearth this meaning by engaging in creative expression. The creative expressive process and the products of creative expression illuminate, for the women, the taken-for-granted meanings of their experiences. For these women, their experiences of creative expression are an unearthing of meaning that already exists, yet, is hidden from themselves until they engage in creative expression. Though much of their creative expression yields visual images, the taken-for-granted meanings are a culmination of a range of sensory experiences. For example, the women come to understand the pain of their significant life events by touch during writing or while throwing clay on a pottery wheel, by hearing during playing or listening to music, and by smell or taste during the cooking experience.
The women's inward looking is made possible by experiencing the creative expressive process through one or more senses.

**Creatively Expressing as Looking Inward**

The women engaged in various forms of expression during or soon after their significant life events. Gradually over time, through the creative process, and through their relationship with their products of expression, the women's modes of creative expression begin to change, for example, from making crafts to writing poetry that reflected the women's emotional pain. Their creative expression no longer is a reflection of the outer world disconnected from themselves and their experiences. Rather, it represents their deepest inner selves.

In Chapter 5, I suggested that the women are present in an intuitive way with, for example their painting or quilting. They are able to face the pain of their significant life events by allowing their internal pain to be expressed in their creative expression. The women create with and through an inward view of themselves. Rockwood (1999) described the influence of art on healing and in revealing aspects of the self to the participants in her study and to others. The women in this present study speak of being surprised at the creative expression that emerges. They experience it as coming from deep inside, emerging only when they are willing to be open to self-reflection and to accept this creative expression as a reflection of themselves and of their experiences.

Numerous studies, such as Lynch's (1992), Rossiter and Brown's (1998), and Spencer's (1997) studies identified positive life changes, most commonly increased self-esteem or self-worth, that arose from engaging in creative expression. Positive
life changes were also found in this present study; however, those changes include
gaining trust in and respect for themselves. Although the women experience being
drawn toward and being repelled from creative expression, it is their openness to the
type of and nature of the creative expression that is crucial in their journeys. When
the women begin to value themselves, then they experience trust in and respect for
both themselves and the creative process. With this trust and respect, the women
experience being free to be vulnerable. In essence, they experience giving
themselves permission to engage in the creative expressive process in order to
come to terms with their significant life events. An aspect of being free to be
vulnerable includes the experience of transcendence that I will address later in this
chapter.

By allowing themselves to become vulnerable within the creative process, the
women connect with and discover aspects of themselves that they have never
before experienced. Their bodies respond to and their feelings are expressed in
their full range of creative expression. They experience a sensual connection with
the products and process of expression and a new relationship with themselves,
both which are woven together with their experiences of coming to terms with their
significant life events. Through self-reflection and the creative expressive process of
externalizing their thoughts and feelings, the women experience lessening of the
pain of their significant life events. They place their pain outside themselves and
experience healing from that pain. Rockwood’s (1999) study, too, found that people
express their emotional pain in various forms of creative expression and, then,
experience being healed.
The women’s experiences are revealed to be energized by a lifeline of energy associated with engaging in the creative process. This energy seemingly comes from an unknown source, but is related to the process of their creative expression. I interpret this as showing that their energy is strengthened by the women taking time for themselves in order to nurture themselves. Although some of the women also describe being energized by nurturing others, there exists a fine balance between nurturing oneself and nurturing others, a point that I will elaborate on later in this chapter. The women experience an additional source of energy from communities of people. Groups of women are an energy source for most of the women, while others are energized by groups of men and women. Regardless of the gender, the women receive support from communities of people and, consequently, the women experience personal growth.

This study has shown that the lifeline of energy propels the women toward a different way of looking at life. The notion of looking has similarities to MacLeod’s (1996) writings about noticing, in combination with understanding and acting. MacLeod’s research reveals that through experienced nurses’ involvement with patients in a caring and concerned manner, the nurses notice unique aspects of the patients’ conditions and situations, and the nurses see possibilities in the patients’ situations. The nurses understand the patients’ situations, differently, by being involved with them. For the women in this study, their involvement with their creative expression enables them to notice aspects of themselves in relation to their significant life events in such a way that they see and experience possibilities in their
futures. As the women engage in creative expression by looking inward, they come to understand themselves and their significant life events in new ways.

The women's experiences are similar to Heidegger's (1953/1996) notion of dwelling that exists in looking (Dasein). Dasein, exists as understanding inside that dwelling place. The women's worlds are made visible to themselves and are understood, by dwelling with their experiences of their significant life events and by engaging in creative expression. The women come to understand themselves differently than in the past.

The women's journeys are a time of coming to understand themselves by looking inward. As they move along on their journeys their views of themselves change. It is this new perspective to which I now turn.

Seeing One's Self Through a New Lens of Meaning

By looking deep inside themselves, the women see themselves in new ways. Much like putting on glasses with changed lenses, the women see themselves and, thus, their worlds differently. By experiencing their creative expression both in process and in products, they view themselves and their significant life events from changing vantage points. Their creative expression shifts, reflecting changes in their relationship with their significant life events and with themselves. This shift in their creative expression, such as Lisa's creation of pottery that is increasingly open in shape, becomes their new lens of meaning. The women see themselves in new ways as they see their creative expression shift to new shapes or new types of creative expression, for example from cooking to writing (Barbara), or from music to painting (Isis). They see possibilities in themselves that they could not see before.
engaging in creative expression. It is not the mere changes in creative expression that are important, but the changes in themselves that they see reflected in their creative expression.

The women discover aspects of themselves and of their relationships with their significant life events that they did not know existed. By engaging in creative expression, the women unearth the taken-for-granted meanings of their significant life events. The defining moment that I discussed in Chapter 4 reflects the women’s discoveries of possibilities beyond their emotional pain. By no means is this the end of their journeys but, rather, the pivotal point in their journeys whereby they see and come to know themselves in new ways.

Rockwood (1999) described her study’s participants as slipping through an apparent veil before experiencing their spirit. After the appearance of their spirit, healing begins to take place in a new world free from pain. Clark’s (1999) study found the occurrence of tearing the veil between the human and the divine. My study of women’s experiences did not find the presence of a metaphorical veil; however, these women describe experiencing a transcendence during creative expression that may be similar to a spiritual connection. Rockwood suggested that transcendence was commonly experienced when the participants engaged in creative expression. For the women in this present study, transcendence is only possible when they experience being free to be vulnerable within the creative expressive process. They achieve this freedom by giving themselves permission to engage in whatever form of creative expression toward which they are drawn. Freedom to create in a transcendent and deeply reflective way prompts them to see
themselves through new lenses of meaning. They begin to view themselves differently, and an aspect of that new view is coming to relate to their female selves in new and positive ways.

These women's experiences of seeing themselves through new lenses of meaning represent their mining of the meaning of their significant life events, balanced with their recognition that the very core of their being is dependent upon ongoing engagement in creative expression. Self-reflection and externally expressing their emotional pain converge in a moment of self-discovery that reflects the women's passage toward self-healing. This is the defining moment when the women's significant life events no longer consume their lives. By engaging in, for example journalling or quilting, the women unearth the taken-for-granted meaning that is hidden from themselves.

The women experience turning toward being healed from the pain of their significant life events as they shift to looking at their worlds outside themselves. This new view differs from how they viewed their worlds before engaging in creative expression. This new world is a reflection of the equilibrium they now experience within themselves and the equilibrium they now experience in relation to their place in the world. Their creative expression reflects this relationship and the freedom to engage in different forms of creative expression.

**Creatively Expressing as Looking Outward**

In Chapter 4, I described the women's present journeys as being impacted by their past lives including their past creative expressive experiences, and eventually being focused toward future possibilities. Their present creative expressive journeys
began during or soon after their significant life events. At that time, they experienced creating as looking outward, either because they were experiencing being overpowered by their significant life events and by their life roles, or to avoid their emotional pain. It is common for the women to begin to make brief creative forays into their significant life events and into their more distant pasts and, eventually, to start looking and moving forward into their futures. By visiting their life events, and distant pasts, they shift from creatively expressing, as looking outward, to creatively expressing as looking inward. In so doing, the women experience a shifting perspective of themselves and of their significant life events.

Once the women reach the pivotal juncture on their journeys, they begin to gradually shift their view to looking at their world outside themselves. In turn, their creative expression reflects this further change in view. The essence of creating as looking outward, is discussed in Chapter 6. This looking outward is very different from the outward focus that encompassed their creative expression either before their significant life events or at a time when they had not given themselves permission to experience their emotional pain.

Creating as looking outward, now involves creating products that reflect a sense of hope for the future, a world of light, and a feeling of freedom. Rockwood (1999) identified the change from darkness to light on the creative journey. In this present study, the women do not describe experiencing darkness although they describe experiencing emotional pain. Rather than moving from darkness, the women experience a changing focus of their looking, from looking superficially at their significant life events, to looking in a deep and involved way at the meaning
that their pain holds for them. Ultimately they experience a lifting of the seeming weight of their significant life events.

The women in this study described that prior to their significant life events, they were blind to their disequilibrium. By engaging in creative expression, it is as though the women become aware of looking differently at their outside worlds. The women come to understand that when they experience their emotional pain, they notice their unbalanced lives. Eventually, they experience a sense of harmony and equilibrium.

**A New Being**

I have described how these women feel intensely connected to their creative expression and to themselves. The women move to being vulnerable within their creative processes. They embody their creative expression and, in turn, discover their essential being, as women.

**Being in a New World in a New Way**

The women describe experiencing a shift in power from feeling that their significant life events have power over them, to feeling that they have power over their own lives. This shift in power occurs as a result of the creative process. Their deep engagement with their creative expression and the transformative nature of their experiences give themselves permission, again, to nurture themselves.

These women come to experience themselves in new ways. Their being evolves through the emotional pain of their significant life events and the meaning they mine during their personal creative expressive processes. The women describe experiencing a transition and rebirth of themselves. As I mentioned earlier in this
chapter, the women’s experiences are similar to Rockwood’s (1999) study that revealed the notion of slipping through a veil as a turning point in glimpsing one’s spirit while on a healing journey. The women in this present study experience a profound connection with their inner beings in becoming deeply attuned to their bodies, minds, and souls. Their creative expression becomes the window to their being as the women unearth the hidden meaning of their significant life events. They become alert to their needs and they experience being healed from the trauma of their significant life events. By forgiving themselves and others for past actions and by validating and accepting who they are, the women experience an inner strength that empowers themselves as women within their new personal worlds. This all happens, directed by themselves, as they work with their creative expression, be it cooking, writing, painting, quilting, or throwing clay on a pottery wheel. It is through the process and products of their creative expression that the women come to know and experience themselves in new ways and to experience balance in their lives.

Bailey (1997) suggested that people who engage in artwork within the context of life-threatening illnesses give birth to their products of creative expression and potentially nurture others by way of their art. By meeting their needs through the creative expressive process, Bailey states that people may no longer need to be cared for by other; but, rather, their caring perspective focuses outward. As part of their experience of transcendence, Rockwood’s (1999) participants were described as making a transition from healing themselves during the process of creative expression to healing others. Within what the women in this present study understand to be new worlds, they realize a shift in their nurturing roles. They shift
from nurturing themselves by nurturing others to nurturing themselves to nurture others. Over an extended period of time, these women had experienced feeling personally oppressed by their nurturing roles in that through nurturing others they were losing their very selves. With the emergence of their new selves in their new worlds, they no longer need to focus their attention on others' needs in order to meet their own needs. Instead, they change their nurturing roles to focus on meeting their own needs first. Their nurturing roles in their nurturing worlds seemingly turn right-side-up for them. Once their personal needs are met they become empowered to nurture others. Creative expression is the catalyst and the medium through which they find ways to empower themselves.

The shift in thinking and being that these women have described resembles Gadamer's (1993/1996) notion of equilibrium in health. Creative expression becomes a means for the women to restore or achieve balance within themselves. Although the products of creative expression, such as art, music, or cooking are not the basis for this shift, the creative expressive experience is the catalyst for the shift to occur and the shift, itself, exists within the being of each woman. The women in this study are their own healers. By engaging in creative expression they restore or achieve equilibrium within their inner beings. Changes are found in the products of the women's creative expression as they come to terms with their significant life events. As these women experience balance and, thus, health, their creative expression changes. No longer does their creative expression reflect their inner turmoil. Rather, their creative expression reflects the harmony that they experience.
The women’s health and equilibrium are not products of someone else’s work but, rather, become their own and are within themselves. The products of the women’s creative expression are a reflection of themselves. The women cannot step back from their products because they become their own products of work and, as such, they experience being in harmony with their creative expression and within themselves.

**Experiencing Harmony as Healing**

Achieving health and equilibrium is recognized by some of the women as being sudden and for others it is gradual. The women’s lives have been disturbed by their significant life events. For some of the women, their sense of disequilibrium has existed for much of their lives while, for others, their sense of disequilibrium is solely related to their significant life events.

The women talk about returning to their lives that used to include creative expression. This return is similar to Bailey’s (1997) discussion of the power of creative expression in reconnecting people to their spiritual roots. The women speak of the power, sense of balance, and new life that comes from engaging in creative expression. Returning to their creative expression is reconnecting with their personal lifelines and with a means to survive. For some, they reconnect with their lives before their significant life events. Lawson (1997) referred to a sense of grounding experienced by people who engage in creative expression, much like reconnecting with their previous lives and to their spiritual roots from whence their lives began. Without creative expression, equilibrium is missing from the lives of the women in this present study. Creative expression is the means for them to regain a
harmonious balance (Gadamer, 1993/1996) within themselves and within their lives and to experience wellness. How, when, and if the women experienced balance in the past is not the issue. It is meeting their needs and achieving their bodies’ natural equilibrium that is now important. Compared with its portrayal in some of the literature (e.g., Lynch, 1996; Manheim, 1998; Ulak & Cummings, 1997), engaging in creative expression within the context of emotionally painful significant life events is not a static experience for the women. Rather, it is dynamic in that they experience change within themselves, change that is driven by personal energy. The women’s experiences of engaging in creative expression are their very survival; they are their very beings.

During, and as a result of the creative expressive journey, the women discover their natural equilibrium, a capacity that has existed all along. Their state of disequilibrium was all but unnoticed by the women until their significant life events occurred. The women experience being healed from the emotional pain of their significant life events and discover a new sense of well-being. Therefore, from these results it is clear that healing from significant life events is possible through the everyday experience of creative expression without requiring the direction or guidance of a therapist (Erikson, 1979). This does not mean that therapists are unnecessary or not beneficial but, rather, that there is a place for everyday creative expression outside of therapy. The women in this study experience their personal strength and power through their everyday personal journeys toward balance in their lives.
Being and Becoming Through Community

At first glance it seems as if the women’s new ways of being within the world came about through their solitary journeys toward health. The women experience harmony as healing by engaging in their individual creative expressive processes. The findings of Gonick-Barris (1982) and McGarry and Prince’s (1998) studies point toward the influence of community on people’s personal growth. Bailey (1997) discussed the value of community as a way of giving to others and, thus, nurturing self. The lay literature, perhaps, best illuminates the hidden meaning of the influence of community on the creative expressive experience.

Cooper and Bufeld (1977) described the uplifting, supportive experiences of women coming together to quilt. Although the quilting process brought the women together, to create together, their products of creative expression were reflective of their love for others in the world. Bailey (1997), Anderson and Gold (1998) and Binet (1994) described the support that people experience in coming together in a community of people to share the creative experience. They describe these community experiences occurring in an everyday way and being linked to maintaining wellness.

Time and time again, the women in this present study told their stories of the role of specific communities in their creative expressive journeys. Their communities became their support and confirmation to continue with the creative expressive process, both in the midst of their significant life events and well after their significant life events were no longer paramount in their lives. In this present study, once the women experienced personal strength from their communities, they
confidently became a part of those communities. They experienced a new-found confidence about themselves.

The women experienced that their being emerged strong and balanced through connecting with a community. They looked beyond their present selves to feeling and becoming whole and in harmony with themselves and with others. Rockwood (1999) described the connection between community and spiritual healing as being “in relationship to society, to the social order” (p. 176). The women in this present study described moving toward understanding themselves, their place in their community, and their worlds. They experienced being and becoming through their personal creative experiences and through their creative experiences with others.

**Practice Implications**

From this research, it is apparent that creative expression can be a powerful influence in moving women forward in their journeys to deal with their significant life events. With this being the case, counsellors can play a role by acknowledging the value of creative expression and supporting women on their journeys. This support of clients’ creative expression can be in combination with psychotherapy whereby clients engage in creative expression, either separate from or in conjunction with counselling sessions. It is important that the counselling role includes being attuned to women’s creative expressive experiences and being supportive of women in their engagement in creative expression. The possibility exists that the women will experience personal growth by discovering, for themselves, the meaning of their lived creative expressive experiences. This counselling approach, supportive of
healing from significant life events and through the creative expressive process, transfers agency to the client. In contrast to the view expressed in much of the counselling literature (e.g., France & Allen, 1997; Glaister, 1994; Glaister & McGuinness, 1992; Levy, 1998; Rossiter, 1992) it is not the therapist who influences the client's understanding of herself by directing the type and nature of the creative expression. Rather, it is the client who engages in personally chosen everyday engagement in creative expression who comes to understand herself in a new way.

Counsellors can invite clients to engage in creative expression on an ongoing basis during and after psychotherapeutic intervention. The potential exists for women to experience continued well-being from their private and ongoing engagement in creative expression whether or not a significant life event is uppermost in their present lives. By engaging in creative expression, it is possible for women to maintain wellness before, during, and beyond significant life events. My research indicates the potential for women to achieve a sense of harmony and to restore and maintain their psychological equilibrium.

To be attuned to the power of creative expression, I recommend that counsellors, themselves, develop their own ways of expressing themselves creatively. It is possible that counsellors can better connect with and relate to the experiences of their clients and support them in their creative expressive journeys when the counsellors, too, are on their own journeys. Other health care professionals also have a role in informing women and other clients about the value of creative expression, and a role in supporting and inviting them to engage in creative expression.
This research is focused on women and, thus, my recommendations focus on women. The literature in the field of creative expression indicates that men also engage in creative expression and benefit from this experience. However, because I did not study men's lived experiences, I can only assume that if men were supported in their creative journeys that they, too, would experience growth in their lives.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The following research directions would enlighten our understanding of the experience of engaging in creative expression. Although I solicited participation of both men and women in this study, only women volunteered. As a result, this research reflects the unique experiences of a self-select set of women, including their relationships with their female selves and their nurturing roles as, for example, wives and mothers. This study could be repeated with men as the participants, to fill out aspects of the lived experiences that differ from women, and to show similarities between men's and women's experiences.

In this study I was open to participants from any culture. The six women who volunteered are Caucasian. Culture was not introduced by the participants nor by me as a topic of conversation in the interviews, so I cannot add insights related to ethnic background and beliefs. To bring out the influence of culture on people's experiences of engaging in creative expression, a study could be designed to focus on cultural aspects and experiences of engaging in creative expression within particular cultures.

This study shows that engaging in creative expression is an important activity
for these six women's ongoing wellness and, thus, it may have broader implications for many females of all ages. This being the case, it would be valuable for female children and adolescents to learn early on in their lives how they can engage in creative expression to achieve and maintain equilibrium and wellness. Studies focused on children's and adolescent's engagement in creative expression within school and community settings could reveal the impact of creative experiences on their health and wellness. In addition, research on the experiences of children and adolescents engaging in creative expression would inform Family Therapy about the influences of creative expression and how those influences might have a role within the family as a whole. Given that in this present study it was shown that meaning is discovered through the creative process, a study of families' engagement in creative expression could add to Family Therapy knowledge of opening space to discover ways for change to occur.

This research raises questions about the creative expressive experience. One key question is: How do the experiences of the six women in this study relate to the experiences of people who engage in creative expression without significant life events? It is possible that people who engage in creative expression, consistently turn to, for example their painting or music, when they encounter common difficulties such as day-to-day anxiety or stress. A study that examines people's experiences related to creative expression without the presence of significant life events, (but including common difficulties) would reveal whether there are similarities and/or differences between those whose goal is healing and those whose goal is primarily maintenance of health.
The women who volunteered, presented only their experiences with difficulties, although I had asked for participants who had experienced a range of significant life events, including happy and exciting events. New research could bring to light similarities or differences between engaging in creative expression during a range of significant life events and reveal the impact on a person’s health.

Beyond the relationship of creative expression with difficult life events, this research raises additional and fundamental questions. What are the common elements between various forms of creative expression? Perhaps there are types of expression, such as physical expression or general dialogue, that would not contain the elements commonly found in creative expression. Erickson (as cited in Congdon, 1990) states that the media themselves are teachers. People come to know themselves and to grow as individuals when they learn from the ways that the media consistently responds. Another question arises, then, what is it about creative expression, as opposed to physical expression or general dialogue, that positively affects a person’s health?

Given that the present study showed that creative expression contributes to a person’s wellness and equilibrium, perhaps illness or disequilibrium is caused or exacerbated by experiencing a blocking of one’s opportunities for creative expression. Further research could address this question and contribute to the understanding of the relationship between creative expression and overall wellness.

A hermeneutic phenomenological research approach was chosen, since the original aim of this study was to unearth the taken-for-granted meaning of the everyday lived experiences of the participants. New research similar to this study
could be conducted using, for example, grounded theory or feminist analyses to reveal different aspects of this experience. In addition, the adult learning literature could help reveal the nature of change in adults who engage in creative expression.

Ultimately, any new research that has a similar focus, potentially will add valuable knowledge to the new and growing field of creative expression. It is my recommendation and my hope that counsellors and health professionals will work together with individual communities to develop opportunities within communities for everyday creative expression. I recommend that people of all ages be invited to participate in creative expression in health care settings, and within communities, to further study and promote mental health and wellness.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this interpretive study was to explore the meaning of women’s everyday experiences of engaging in creative expression that seems to be taken-for-granted. By engaging in, for example painting, journalling, writing music, quilting, cooking, or throwing clay on a pottery wheel, it is possible for women to maintain wellness before, during, and beyond significant life events. This research points toward the important role of counsellors, of acknowledging the value of creative expression and supporting women in their creative journeys. A question is raised by this research about the value of therapists assuming directive roles within clients’ engagement in creative expression.
References


Appendix A

Letter to Colleagues and Acquaintances

Marion Healey-Ogden
Address
Phone Number
e-mail address
Date

Name
Address

Dear:

As you know, I am a graduate student at UNBC presently working on my thesis in order to complete my MEd degree in Counselling. In my research I will be exploring the meaning of engaging in creative expression within the context of a significant life event. I am at the stage of identifying five (5) adult participants for this study who would be interested in reflecting on their experiences in a 1 - 1 ¼ hour interview and in feedback sessions on the fit of my interpretations with their experiences.

Participants must meet the following criteria:

1. He or she has engaged in creative expression that is meaningful to him or her during a significant life event. The creative activity could include, for example, painting, drawing, weaving, playing music, singing, dancing, writing journals or poetry, cooking, gardening, etc. The quality of the creative expression is not important. For the significant life event, I am referring to any experience that the person considers to be of special importance to him or her, for example, an illness, an accident, recovering from an addiction, the birth of a baby, returning to school, starting or leaving a job, marriage, divorce, etc.

2. The significant life event occurred within the past five (5) years.

3. He or she is not currently involved in psychotherapy

Do you know any adults in _____ city ____ whom you believe fit the above criteria? If so, please ask those people interested in becoming involved in this study to contact me directly via phone or e-mail. I will explain the details of this study to each potential participant who contacts me. Thank-you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Marion Healey-Ogden, RN, BSN, MA
Appendix B

Informed Consent

I, _________________________________, agree to participate in a research study to be undertaken by Marion Healey-Ogden as part of her Masters in Education (Counselling) degree, University of Northern British Columbia. I understand that the purpose of this research is to examine the meaning of engaging in creative expression within the context of a significant life event. Information gathered in this research will help counsellors and health professionals to better support people. This research will also provide information for the general public in support of self-therapy.

I have been selected because I have engaged in creative expression during a significant life event, specifically _________________________, within the past five years and I am not currently involved in psychotherapy. I understand that the risks of this study could range from nothing to experiencing some of the feelings that I had during my significant life event.

I acknowledge and understand the following:

1. I will participate in a 1-1 ½ hour interview with Marion Healey-Ogden about my experience of engaging in creative expression in relation to my experience of _______________________________. At a later date, I will be asked for feedback on the fit of Marion’s interpretations with my experiences. The interview and feedback sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed in full or in part. My name will be omitted from transcriptions and a pseudonym used in transcriptions, interpretations, and descriptions.

2. At any time during this study, I am free to withdraw my participation and any information obtained from me will not be used. As well, I am free to limit areas of my experience that I wish to discuss and/or reveal. I may also limit aspects of my creative expressive work that I wish to show and/or allow to be photographed.

3. Information provided by myself and others will be blended together and the results will be used for research purposes, for application in future counselling services, and may be reported in academic journals and in other media. Prior to publication and presentation, I will be given the opportunity to review and then accept or decline the inclusion of information given by me. If I give permission for my creative expressive work to be photographed, these pictures may be included in thesis results.
4. Confidentiality will be maintained. Anonymity may not always be possible due to the potential that pictures of creative expressive artifacts or some descriptions of life experiences may be recognized by some members of the public.

5. Transcriptions and notes will only be available to Marion Healey-Ogden, to her assistant, and to her thesis committee members. Raw data will be stored in a locked cabinet for 5 years following retrieval of information and destroyed thereafter.

6. Marion Healey-Ogden will provide a list of professionals who are interested in and available to provide counselling for me in the event that participation in any part of this research elicits memories and/or emotional difficulties. I further understand that it will be left to me to decide on my need for psychotherapy and to choose the therapist whom I prefer. In addition, I understand that payment for psychotherapy would be my responsibility.

7. I voluntarily and freely give my consent to participate in this study.

8. I will be given a written summary of the results of this research.

Participant’s Signature ________________________________
Witness ________________________________
Date ________________________________

If you should have any questions about this research, please contact Marion Healey-Ogden at _____ or contact her supervisor, Martha MacLeod at ____. Direct any concerns about the overall conduct of this research to Dr. Max Blouw at _____, in the Office of Research and Graduate Studies, UNBC.

Thank-you for participating in this study.
Appendix C

Information About Therapists

Dear ________participant’s name__________

In the event that participation in any part of this research elicits memories and/or emotional difficulties, the following is a list of therapists in Prince George who are interested in and available to provide counselling to you, if you feel this is a need. Please be aware that payment will be your responsibility.

I am a therapist with ________ Counselling thus, due to conflict of interest, this list does not include therapists from that office. However, you certainly are free to make an appointment with any counsellor at _______ Counselling or with any other counsellor not on this list. If you choose to see a therapist listed below it may be helpful to you, when making an appointment, to state that you are a participant in this study. You are free to mention my name.

1. Counsellor’s Name
   Counselling Office
   Address

2.

3.

4.

5.

If you choose, I can refer you to additional resources in ___________. Should you have any questions or concerns about any of this information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Marion Healey-Ogden
Appendix D

Guiding Questions for Hermeneutic Interview

1. Would you please describe a life event that you consider significant and during which you engaged in creative expression?

2. Would you please describe an example of your creative expression that stood out for you during that significant life experience? What was special about that example?

3. If you are comfortable showing me your creative work, I would be interested in seeing it and hearing your descriptions of it.

4. What was it like for you to engage in creative expression during your significant life event? What were you thinking, feeling, and experiencing?

5. How did your experience with creative expression relate to any other experience that you have had?

6. Would you like to add anything else?
Appendix E
Participants' Creative Expressive Products

1. Lisa's box with a lid
Appendix E
Participants' Creative Expressive Products

Verse 1  Life is such a funny thing
         it asks us to be open
         to possibilities and change
         to sometimes feelin broken

Chorus    THAT'S HOW IT WAS WHEN I MET YOU
           THAT'S HOW IT WILL ALWAYS BE
           SOMETIMES WE LAUGH, SOMETIMES WE CRY
           BUT ALWAYS WE ARE FREE

Verse 2  Love is such a funny place
         it asks us to be gentle
         with ourselves and with our mate
         not always sentimental

Chorus    repeat

Bridge    WHEN I MET YOU I HUNG ON TO THE BITTER SIDE OF
           LIES
           THAT LOVERS ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH AND NEVER
           MAKE YOU CRY
           AND WHEN YOU FALL YOU CAN'T GO BACK
           NOW I THINK I'VE LEARNED

Verse 1    repeat

Chorus    repeat

2. Isis' positive song, "We Are Free"
Appendix E
Participants' Creative Expressive Products

3. Carol's clay piece, “Joy”
## TURKEY MEATBALL CHOWDER

*(Alias – Comfort Food)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 lbs. lean ground turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tsp. seasoned salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/8 tsp. pepper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 eggs, slightly beaten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼ c. finely chopped parsley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/3 c. fine cracker crumbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 tbsp. milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 tbsp. flour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tbsp. salad oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 to 6 onions, cut in eighths (or smaller)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 c. water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 c. tomato juice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 tbsp. chicken bouillon powder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 c. sliced carrots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4 c. sliced celery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 to 3 c. diced potatoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¼ c. long grain rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 tbsp. sugar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 tsp. salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 bay leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>½ to 1 tsp. marjoram leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (12 oz.) can Mexicorn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combine ground turkey, seasoned salt, pepper, eggs, parsley, cracker crumbs and milk. Mix thoroughly. Form into balls about the size of a walnut (makes about 40). Let the meatballs sit on a sheet of wax paper until ready to use.

Put all remaining ingredients (except add corn last 10 minutes of cooking). Bring to boil, cover. Reduce heat and cook at slow boil for 15 minutes. Add, one at a time, the meatballs until they are all incorporated into the chowder. Cook another 15 – 10 minutes, until meat is cooked through. During last 10 minutes add the can of Mexicorn.

This recipe seems to work well for people who are stressed and/or in trauma. It is very easy to eat—soft in texture, sweet and comforting and hearty enough to be nutritious.

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4. Barbara’s recipe for comfort food, “Turkey Meatball Chowder”
Appendix E
Participants' Creative Expressive Products

5. Penny’s Tile

6. Susan’s quilt, “A Field of Roses”
Appendix E
Participants' Creative Expressive Products

7. Lisa's clay piece with outside decoration

8. Lisa's clay belly shape with arms
Appendix E
Participants’ Creative Expressive Products

Carol's triptych