

**The journeying body:  
Narratives of women who have experienced the transition from  
disconnection to connection with their body**

by © Deidre Keating

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## **Abstract**

This inquiry centers on the movements of the journeying body in its transition between, across, and through experiences of disconnection and connection. Supported by a hermeneutic framework, this study explores the key constructs of disconnection, connection, and transition in the context of the lived body experiences of six women. Of particular interest are the ways in which the women choose to describe or frame their bodily journeys, the multi-layered impacts of such journeys on their identities, relationships, and selves, and the nuanced meanings that they create from the totality of their dis/embodied experiences. Shared understandings are cultivated across the collectivity of the women's narratives, offering expansive perspectives of the shifting and evolving experiences of the journeying body. Three central understandings emerge from this inquiry: the emergence of hope, meaning, and empowerment, the fluctuating nature of the body, and the significance of listening to and within the body.

## Gratitude

Gratitude to the women who have supported, honoured, and held me throughout this journey. It was indeed a journey, one of many twists and shifts, and one made easier and sweeter by the beautiful and empowering female energy in my midst. To the women who participated in this inquiry, I thank you for your openness, excitement, vulnerability, awareness, and courage. Your stories have made my heart happy and full.

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Gratitude to those who may read this thesis and find themselves in it. I have created this for you.

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“Into this, then, came the dream. It took that which I cared most deeply about in myself and my work and turned it over slowly and thoughtfully, reflecting various aspects of it and pointing out its validity and meaning. The dream said to me that what I was doing, my life, my ideas, and my work, were coming out of a center inside myself. It said that I needed to trust the truth of that process and to let it come out more fully. . . to trust that which was truly individual, was truly my own, a woman’s own, was very much needed” (Duerk, 2004, p. 21).

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## Chapter One: Introduction to my research

This chapter begins my research journey, exploring the growth of this inquiry from conception to creation, and each movement in between. In the introductory chapter, I will share the personal connection in which my study is grounded, offering the reasons for which I have proposed this particular inquiry at this time. The significance of my research will thus be highlighted. In addition, I will describe the theoretical framework supporting my inquiry and the specific research questions that have brought it to life. This chapter concludes with an in-depth exploration of the three core concepts upon which this research is founded – disconnection, connection, and transition – as located within the literature, unearthing the gap in knowledge that my research seeks to fulfill.

### Identifying key terms

Central to this research is the identification of the key research terms used in this study: bodily disconnection, connection, and transition. As these processes are highly subjective experiences, they may be perceived and conceptualized in diverse ways. The literature provides varied meanings of these processes, as will be explored in detail in the second chapter. I will now present my own personal interpretations of the three experiences, to indicate the lens through which I am looking, and the parameters through which this research unfolds.

Firstly, my conceptualization of bodily disconnection concerns a feeling of detachment from the body, as if the mind and body exist as separate entities. While having cultivated this understanding prior to beginning this research, as the result of certain life experiences, I have since discovered that my interpretation is in alignment with that of many theorists whom I have encountered in this exploration. I have found my personal understanding of bodily disconnection mirrored particularly in the work of Aposhyan (2004), Orbach (2003; 2006, 2009), and Ray

(2008), amongst several others, as will soon be examined further.

Secondly, my conceptualization of bodily connection centres on a feeling of being fully present within the body-- energetically grounded -- as if the mind and body are working in union. This perception, too, has been supported by the work of the abovementioned theorists, as well as numerous others, as the literature review will reveal. Lastly, in my inquiry, transition refers to a process of movement and/or shifting between experiences and spaces. I have situated myself within postmodern theories of development in order to examine the shifting nature of life transitions, and the impact that such may have on the experiences of the journeying body.

Detailed understandings of all three concepts will be presented in the literature review, in which I will also outline the potential contributions of my own research to the rich body of knowledge in this field.

### Choosing my research topic

In writing this first chapter, I am on the *other side* of the research, looking at the path behind me, watching my steps move along with a mixture of persistence, hesitation, and some backward stepping, and now having finally reached their long-sought destination. This research journey began three years ago, and it has been through the curiosity and passion that I hold for this topic, supported by the patience and guidance of my supervisor and research participants, that I still approach this topic with energy, wonder, and dedication. To maintain such energy over a certain period of time requires something beyond the superficial, and that is what I feel that I have with this topic: deep desire, intent, curiosity, and the determination to really and fully *get* my topic from an intellectual stance as well as from an embodied position.

For me, beginning this topic was an act of inquiry of self. This is not a topic that I have taken lightly, but rather one in which I am deeply and fully immersed. It has been a commitment of blood, sweat, and tears, on a very meaningful and visceral level. The journeys of the body have long intrigued me, as my own body has been journeying through peaks and valleys for each of the 34 years of my life thus far. I have had quite an erratic shifting with my body across my life experiences, and, upon contemplating a suitable research topic for my thesis, I sought to understand *that*: What was happening within my own body and mind that one day I would feel powerfully connected to my physical being, while the next day would bring such sudden feelings of estrangement? What was the meaning behind this rollercoaster of a body experience?

Questions inundated my mind prior to proposing this inquiry, as I contemplated the experiences of my own journeying body. Vibrant musings provided fuel for my research, including a mixture of the following: What were my own bodily processes of disconnection and connection about? Why was my body moving through such transitions? Would my relationship with my body always shift? Why have I been through the ups and downs with my body in a seemingly never-ending process, and is this constant shift an integral part of what it means to be an embodied being? Just what I get, so to speak, for having a body and for being alive?

After giving space to these internal queries for some time, I then brought my inquiry outward: to the collective experience of existing within a female body. Removing myself from the equation for a moment, I contemplated the experiences of others around me, the women in my midst, and the multitude of other bodies who are also navigating and seeking their positioning in this world. Such pondering lead me to question how other people -- and in particular, those of us who identify as female -- may make sense of their own physicality.



I was curious to know if other women experienced the same shifts as I did, and at such a rapidly oscillating rate. My mind was alight in an incessant buzz, eager to explore this topic in all of its depth and mystery. Such questions fed my curiosity: Why are we at the whim of our bodily experiences? Or is it truly that our bodies are at the whim of *us*, as thinking, intellectual beings? Why does the body play such a significant role in the unfolding of our life stories? And, once again, the burning inquiry remained: Do other women truly experience the same kind of bodily journeys that have played so prominently in my own life narrative, or am I alone in this shifting body experience?

While my primary motivation for this research was undeniably inner in nature, its potential collectivity began to emerge with further reflection. Emerging from such contemplation was an awareness that this was an area in which others could locate themselves as well: that the journeys of the body are not isolated experiences that keep us separate; they may rather be unifying experiences that reveal many collective understandings of the human identity. In honouring the river of questions flowing through my mind, I started to perceive the relevance of such knowledge to others, and an idea began to take shape in my brain.

Growing steadily was a thought that people of any and all gender and life experiences, as well as those from organizations and institutions of different types, might find an exploration such as mine beneficial, necessary, and potentially life-giving. In particular, I thought of the women who would eventually participate in this study, and the benefits that they might possibly experience in sharing their stories with an attentive and highly attuned heart and ear. My thoughts carried me to the people who would read my completed thesis and who might find themselves and their own stories within it. Additionally, I was thinking of the generations of

students and researchers who could possibly be motivated by this inquiry, as well as those in my own life--being a teacher, counsellor, group facilitator, and community volunteer -- who may reap the gifts of the concentrated work of patience, passion, and energy that I was proposing to begin.

### Creating research questions

Ignited with such passion and energy, my research proposal was initially crafted with an ambitious list of questions that sought to understand the bodily journeys of many different populations of women. I was eager to meet with a wide range of individuals to explore a diversity of colourful dis/embodyed experiences. My mind was full. I wanted to speak with women about their experiences with sexual abuse, eating disorders, miscarriages, drug use, sex work, cancer, disabilities, physical violence, etc. With mindful guidance, however, I focused my inquiry to cover precisely that which I was seeking: how women disconnect and connect with their bodies – for whatever reasons -- and how the transition unfolds between, through, and across these experiences of being.

The specific research questions framing my study include the following:

- ✧ How do women describe their experiences of movement from disconnection to connection with their body?
- ✧ What is this experience like for them emotionally, physically, and/or mentally?
- ✧ And lastly, how do women interpret the transition from disconnection to connection with their body?

Since the time of my initial proposal, I have modified the second question slightly, to add further depth and texture to the totality of the women's experiences. In addition to the three areas highlighted above, I have also sought to understand how the experiences of transition have affected the women socially, spiritually, and sexually, thus providing a more nuanced and encompassing awareness of the impacts that the journeying body may experience. My second question, therefore, now contemplates the emotional, physical, mental, social, spiritual, and sexual implications of the experiences of transition. I seek to understand how experiences of movement from disconnection to connection with their bodies have potentially shaped the women as whole persons, in the context of their mind, body, spirit, sensuality, creativity, and self-expression.

#### Locating my inquiry

While contemplating my research interests and becoming familiar with the literature in this area, I started to perceive a gap of knowledge, and a need which my exploration could potentially fulfill. The literature that informs my inquiry has presented the experience of disconnection quite clearly. I have explored an abundance of research detailing the process and effects of disconnection from the body, labelled differently from diverse experiences and perspectives, as the literature review will show (Aposhyan, 2004; Blood, 2005; Kepner, 1993; Orbach, 2009; Ray, 2008) . The literature similarly reveals the experience of bodily connection through a variety of lenses, offering both theoretical insights and personal accounts of what it means to be embodied (Aposhyan, 2004; Bois, 2009; Cortright, 2007; Conger, 1994; Ray, 2008; Ressler, 2009) . In addition, an exploration of the concept of transition has revealed a multitude of understandings of the various shifts and changes that we experience throughout the lifespan,

through both modern (Allen & Wergin, 2009; Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009; Levinson, 1978; Slater, 2003) and postmodern (Bauman, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Covington, 2007; Miller, 1991; Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000) lenses.

However, while the three processes exist in the literature separately, what I have discovered throughout my search is a lack of connectivity uniting them. They seem to exist only in isolation to one another, in already defined spaces. In seeking to understand the individual experiences of bodily disconnection and connection, and to describe and articulate what it means to transition through, between, and across them, I have perceived an absence of scholarship describing this movement, in what is otherwise quite a rich field of body experiences. This current study aims to contribute to addressing this needed terrain of study, through the dynamic and shifting experiences of six women. I believe that my research is a relevant contribution to this field, as it gives voice, agency, and power to the women who have lived – and are still living -- the experiences of bodily disconnection, connection, and transition, and as it brings to life each experience not as a separate event, but as an element of continuity and relationship within a grander vision of the journeying body.

#### Locating myself

Identifying my position within this research is necessary. Davies and Harré (1990) have described the effect of positioning on the understanding of a narrative or conversation, suggesting that we understand a story or dialogue from the particular location that we occupy – consisting of experiences, thoughts, emotions, and/or beliefs -- and that words and anecdotes may thus change in meaning from one individual to the next, depending on the context of the individual. These authors have explained the following:

Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (Davies & Harré, 1990, p.46).

By locating myself within the context of the study, I may clearly show my connection to the topic, as well as acknowledge personal factors that have potentially shaped the collection and interpretation of the data.

The positioning of perspective aligns well with the hermeneutic framework supporting this study. As will be explored in further detail in the methodology chapter, a key element of hermeneutic inquiry concerns pre-understandings – the knowledge and/or experiences the researcher brings to the study -- and how such may colour or shape the understandings gained within the study (Chang, 2010). Positioning oneself in the context of the research encourages an awareness of the thoughts, experiences, emotions, and/or beliefs that one brings, and how these may influence interpretation and understanding.

From my position as both a researcher and an individual who has experienced the very concepts central to this study, I have brought to the experiences of the participants a subjectivity that has been developed through the unfolding of my own life narrative. My vantage point is thus coloured with understandings, emotions, and beliefs gained via the experiences of my journeying body. Being mindful of my positioning in relation to the study has allowed me to understand more clearly the postmodern notion of multiple realities as they relate to the experiences of the body. I understand that my own experience has been interpreted through a subjective lens through which only I am looking, and that the meaning that has been derived

from my experiences is, therefore, not a universal truth, but an inner discovery. I am similarly aware that the experiences that the women have shared reveal only some of many multiple possible understandings that may exist, and that another researcher occupying a different position may interpret their experiences in differing ways, based on their own positioning and perspective. Knowing my own positioning and lens in this study facilitates a differentiation between what I think and how I feel, and the thoughts and feelings that arise within and from the women's stories.

To locate myself further in this inquiry at this time, I feel that it is important to discuss my engagement of gender constructs in this research. Thus far in this thesis, I have referred widely to the notion of "female" or "women", as it is both through a female-identified lens that I am looking, as well as upon a female-identified population that my attention is presently focused. In voicing my own body experience, I speak from the positioning of a cisgender female body, a body that binary gender norms would classify as female. However, I understand and honour the fluid nature of gender identity and expression, and am aware that gender is a social construct of which there may be a myriad of experiences and conceptualizations that rest beyond binary discourse (Foss, Domenico, & Foss, 2013; Lane, 2009; Serano, 2007; Wiseman & Davidson, 2011).

Although my research at this time is rooted in the female body experience, welcome within these parameters are the body experiences of all people who self-identify as women. My engagement of the words "female" and "woman" thus refers to any individual who identifies as a woman, and my use of the pronouns "she" and "her" are likewise inclusive of all female-identified experiences. The present focus on the female bodied experience does not intend to disregard or minimize the experiences of people of other gender identities and experiences; this

current study is the first of several which I intend to pursue, and future studies will give much needed space to explore other gendered and non-gendered bodily experiences.

### Writing my inquiry

The writing style of my thesis is reflective of the hermeneutic methodology supporting this research (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Lane, 2005). Several facets of hermeneutic inquiry are reflected within my choice of writing style, including the hermeneutic circle, an important element that will be further explored in the third chapter (Chang, 2010; Debesay, Naden & Slettbo, 2008). I believe that this present research embodies the movement implicit within the hermeneutic circle, inviting people deeply into the rhythms of the journeying body, in an exploration of the interpretation and understanding of lived body experiences. This research journey has been a sacred process from beginning to end, continuously ebbing and flowing in a unique, messy, and shifting rhythm. A spiral journey, this inquiry has moved back and forth, expanding outwards and contracting inwards, uniting the inner and the outer, and illuminating questions and insights that have opened new ways of thinking, experiencing, and understanding the transitions of the body. My lyrical writing style thus seeks to capture and to honour such evolving energy and movement, and to showcase not only the experiences of the journeying body in motion, but also the unfolding of a curious and multi-layered body of research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Women's experiences of their body

The key concepts of bodily disconnection, connection, and transition will now be explored in detail. I have reviewed the literature examining various perspectives of theorists in order to offer a contextualized understanding of the three experiences. This section begins with a nuanced exploration of disconnection, followed by a rich depiction of bodily connection, and concludes with an inquiry into the nature of transition from a variety of different lenses.

#### Experiences of disconnection

Disconnection with the body is a process that may hold multiple meanings and interpretations by the individuals who have experienced it. People, and women in particular, experience such a process for different reasons and in varying ways, depending on the individual, the context in which she lives, and the narratives that she creates based on her experiences.

In reviewing the literature, I have come across many descriptions of the process of disconnection, articulating differences and nuances, depending on the context in which they are engaged. Ray (2008) presents the experience of disconnection as being “out of touch with our body, our emotions, our sense perceptions, even the basic experience of being alive” (p. 57). Bois (2009) describes a person who has experienced disconnection as an individual “who no longer feels themselves, who no longer has any information about their inner states . . . and who expresses a kind of indifference towards themselves. They suffer, but without exactly knowing why.” (p. 159). Kepner (1993) has likewise identified that “Without contact with one’s body, one has no sense of location in the world or of one’s physical presence and boundaries . . . there is only emptiness and the sense that ‘I am nothing’” (p. 107). The experience of disconnection is similarly reflected in the following words by Roth (1998):



So many of us are not in our bodies, really at home and vibrantly present there. Nor are we in touch with the basic rhythms that constitute our bodily life. We live outside ourselves – in our heads, our memories, our longings – absentee landlords of our own estate. (p. 30).

Multiple theories and discourses of bodily disconnection exist in the literature. Certain theorists postulate that disconnection with the body is inherent, believing that the body and mind are essentially separate entities, and that disconnection naturally arises from this dichotomy. Bordo (1993) has highlighted the understanding of Descartes that “The body is the brute material envelope for the inner and essential self, the thinking thing” (p. 144). Descartes (1993) himself has furthermore proclaimed that the distinction between the mind and body is evident, stating that “There is a great difference between a mind and a body in that a body, by its very nature, is always divisible. On the other hand, the mind is utterly indivisible” (p.56). He has suggested that, while we are able to amputate part of our body – thus dividing it into separate parts -- and still remain relatively intact, we are not able to separate any part of the mind from who we are, in so much as we are, he has claimed, “thinking thing(s)” (Descartes, 1993, p 56).

Several theorists seem to agree with this awareness of duality between the body and mind, including Conger (1994) who has indicated that “We build patterns to deny the body altogether”, preferring “our bodies to keep silent so that we can conduct our life undisturbed in our psyche” (p. xvi). Blood (2005) also discusses the existence of mind-body dualism, positing that the mind and body are separated by their very natures: the mind being the conveyer of meaning and perception, and the body being merely an object perceived by the mind. Kepner (1993) has postulated that this proposed duality between the body and the mind has lasting repercussions, causing individuals simply to reside in their bodies, without feeling or

experiencing their bodies as an integral part of their identity. As individuals inhabit their bodies in such a disengaged state, Kepner (1993) has stated that they become alienated from their physical self, becoming “mental and non-corporeal beings” (p.12), which would seem to align well with Descartes’ dualistic proposal.

There are also many theorists, however, who challenge the notion of mind-body separation. Koenig (2008), for instance, affirms that “There is no mind separate from body, no body distinct from mind” (p. 11). Similarly, Blakeslee and Blakeslee (2007) affirm that “Your body is not just a vehicle for your brain to cruise around in. The relationship is perfectly reciprocal: Your body and your brain exist for each other” (p.12). Ray (2008) likewise recognizes the inherent connection between body and mind, and offers a detailed exploration of the radical shift in economic structures that may have initially influenced their split. According to Ray (2008), there exists a historical grounding of the division from our bodily self, stemming from the era in which agriculture was introduced to a society where hunting and gathering had formerly been the normal way of living.

Such an economic shift, Ray (2008) explains, resulted in the minimization of the body’s activity level, while machine-oriented, less-physical tasks became the new norm. Thereafter, individuals evolved to become less reliant on their physical, intuitive sensations – the senses that had previously aided in survival --- and to become more dependent on their mental capabilities. Ray (2008) affirms that “from an evolutionary perspective, then, we modern people are genetically and biologically still the hunter-gatherers we were when agriculture arose” (p. 42). He furthermore encourages that “because our basic makeup is so little different from theirs, full embodiment, while obscured in modern people, is entirely accessible and recoverable. In our genes and in our cells, it is ultimately who we are” (p.42).

Many theorists hence clearly honour the innate unity existing between the body and the mind. Such unity, these theorists propose, remains intact within an individual until a rupture occurs; such a rupture may take many different genres and forms, as will soon be explored. From this perspective, disconnection is conceptualized *not* as inherent, but rather the result of an imposed split between the body and the mind, a split that may arise from a personal experience, such as trauma, or from a collective experience, such as a shift in economic activity. Theorists seem to affirm that, in the absence of such a split, connection between the body and the mind is the natural way of being.

It is within this framework that I situate myself. My views on the body and mind are in alignment with theorists such as Bois (2009), who professes that there is a “dynamic unity” (p. xxvii) that exists between body and mind, and “When the dialogue between the body and the mind is broken . . . we begin to feel a sense of distance from ourselves” (Bois, 2009, p. xxvii). In holding this position, I find meaning in Caldwell’s (1996) words that:

Any event that occurs – whether physical, emotional, cognitive, or spiritual – impacts our whole being. Our experience of an event must come through the sensory systems permeating our flesh – through a pulsing network of nerves—in order to register in the mind . . . and the only way that the mind is made real is through the actions of the body in which it is imbedded. (p.13).

Thus, while recognizing and appreciating the understandings of theorists who separate the mind and the body, it is my personal perspective that the two, in their organic way of being, are aligned, until some force or experience incites their division.

### *Understandings of disconnection*

Various understandings have been articulated in the literature as to how and why bodily disconnection may actually take place. Five of the understandings of disconnection that I have gleaned from the literature include two understandings based in psychological theories of attachment (Conger, 1994; Cortright, 2007; Orbach, 2009) and emotional repression (Cortright, 2007; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000; Shusterman, 2008), and three based in sociocultural theories of society (Aposhyan, 2004; Bordo, 1993; Conger, 1993; Orbach, 2006; Orbach, 2009; Ray, 2008; Savacool, 2009; Shusterman, 2008) gender, (Bordo, 1993; Budgeon, 2003; Gimlin, 2002; Justice, 1996; Orbach, 2006; Orbach, 2009, Savacool, 2009; Sinclair, 2006), and violence and trauma (Baum, 2012; Ben-Shahar, 2012; Elklit & Blum, 2010; Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Ensler, 2013; Levine, 1997; Levine, 2004; Levine, 2010; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000; Shapiro, 2006; Stanek, 2015; Thompson & Walsh, 2010; Wainrib, 2006). These understandings are relevant to this thesis to contextualize the varied experiences of disconnection, as will be explored in the narratives of the journeying body. Such understandings suggest that disconnection is a multi-layered construct that may be experienced and interpreted in diverse ways.

### *Early attachment experiences*

The first understanding of bodily disconnection that I will describe places the idea of disconnection in a localized context, within the family of origin. Some of the literature that I have reviewed indicates that disconnection may actually precede conscious awareness, relaying that detachment between the body and mind may begin, for some individuals, even before the development of somatic awareness. Orbach (2003) and Cortright (2007) agree that our earliest attachment experiences significantly influence our connections to our bodies, and that it is, in

fact, such early experiences that sculpt our own understandings of and relationships to our bodies. I have found a rich depiction of the shaping of our bodies in the extensive work of Orbach (2003; 2006; 2009) whose focus on the body-in-relationship is central to this study.

Orbach (2009) affirms that “Bodies are first formed in infancy and shaped according to the social and individual customs of the families they are born into” (p. 10). From this perspective, our understanding of our physicality is thus manipulated and formed by the ways in which our bodies are perceived and treated by our earliest attachment figures (p. 171). In secure attachment experiences wherein our bodies are acknowledged and accepted by our caregivers, we may develop a strong corporeal connection with our own body, as well as the bodies of those who care for us (Orbach, 2003). Our sense of embodiment and our understanding of the nature of bodies would thus seemingly precede the language or ability to describe it; it would be felt and perceived more so than explained.

In the absence of early secure corporeal experiences, however, Orbach (2009) posits that our connections with our bodies, and with those of our attachment figures, may be comparably weaker; we may, therefore, develop a feeling of body anxiety or uncertainty, in which we are neither certain of our own bodily selves or those of our caregivers. Conger (1994) has emphasized the impact of insecure attachment on our growing sense of body, claiming that “What the mother does not touch remains undeveloped and unconceptualized, so that we grow up with impoverished images of our embodied selves” (p. 69). This understanding is reflected as well in the words of Ensler (2013) who voices her own understanding and experience that:

A mother’s body against a child’s body makes a place. It says you are here. Without this body against your body there is no place . . . . The absence of a body against my body created a gap, a hole, a hunger. This hunger determined my life. (p. 1).

Enslar (2013) furthermore shares that “The absence of a body against my body made attachment abstract. Made my own body dislocated and unable to rest or settle. A body pressed against your body is the beginning of nest” (p. 2). Such a powerful declaration reflects the relational nature of the body, the body in relation to others and to the self, that the literature illustrates as integral in the development of connection to the body.

Our early attachment experiences, according to these theorists, hence seem to play a primary role in the development of our individual sense of our body. The perceptions of our earliest attachment figures of *their* own bodies exert an important influence as well. As Orbach (2009) acknowledges, feelings of either embodiment and disembodiment may be transferred inadvertently from caregiver to child, depending on the relationship that the caregiver has with his or her own body, and how this is outwardly communicated. In the case of an attachment figure who has a conflicting relationship with his or her body, such a struggle may be passed on towards the infant in their care, through words, gestures, or mannerisms; the infant may unconsciously bear witness to the experience of bodily detachment, coming from outside of their own body, and may ultimately adopt this sense of disconnection as their own. Orbach (2009) asserts that the development of a sense of body may involve a “transgenerational transmission of anxious embodiment” (p. 12) from caregiver to infant; this provides further structure to the argument of the importance of early attachment relationships in the cultivation of the understanding of the bodily self.

#### *Emotional repression or minimization*

Another psychological understanding of bodily connection involves the concept of emotional repression or minimization. Emotions exist and interplay within the body, and are thus a dynamic element of the body experience. They are highly embodied experiences, in and of

the physical self. This insight is illuminated through Cortright's (2007) declaration that the "feeling life is embedded in bodily experience" (p. 19) and Rothschild's (2000) proposal that "Emotions, though interpreted and named by the mind, are integrally an experience of the body" (p. 56). Ogden, Minton and Pain (2006) seemingly share this understanding, in their affirmation that emotions are inseparable from the body, being "matters . . . of the heart, the stomach, and intestines . . . they are of the flesh and sear the flesh" (p. 12). Shusterman (2008) likewise offers that it is through bodily sensations that emotions are generated and displayed and that "We only experience (strong emotions) . . . when our bodily reactions . . . kick in" (p. 147), suggesting that we become fully aware of our emotional selves through the vehicle of our body.

A particularly powerful depiction of the emotional-physical link is illuminated by Phillips (2011) in her following assertion:

Our raw emotions are striving to be expressed in the body. They're always moving up and down the chakras and the spinal cord, carrying information on a cellular level, communicating through a psychosomatic network with every system in our body, and seeking a final release and integration through the brain. They're like seedlings burrowing through the soil in search of the sun. If they are stunted in their journey, denied expression, there is no flow, no growth. (p.76).

An identification of emotions as being integral elements of the body's experiences is essential in an exploration of the journeying body for that very reason: if emotions are not expressed or felt, the body becomes the bearer of the repercussions, embedded deep within the physical self, such as the body is both the container of and the medium of communication of the internally integrated experiences. This understanding is highlighted by numerous theorists in multiple contexts (Cortright, 2007; Gendlin, 1978; Levine, 1997; Levine, 2010; Phillips, 2011; Ray, 2008;

Stanek, 2005).

As the body and the emotions are so intimately connected, the experiences of one are integrated with and hence closely impact the experiences of the other. The literature indicates that, in repressing emotions by pushing them below the surface of conscious attention, or minimizing them by not permitting the full release of energy that emotions often require, an individual essentially stifles the embodied experiences attached to these emotions, thereby cutting off dialogue between integrated pieces of the whole self, which may incite experiences of dissociation or detachment (Cortright, 2007; Levine, 1997; Phillips, 2011; Ray, 2008; Stanek, 2015). In the absence of honouring of such embodied experiences, disconnection from the body may ultimately occur. Grounded in the perspectives of the abovementioned theorists, denying the self the experience of feeling the sensation of an emotion may subsequently trigger detachment on multiple levels: physically, emotionally, and holistically.

#### *Sociocultural influences*

A third understanding of bodily disconnection takes detachment outside of the individual sphere, and places it within the larger sociocultural context in which we are situated, a culture which may be perceived by many as being a natural source of both individual and collective disconnection. I find profound meaning in Aposhyan's (2004) affirmation that "Our culture is seriously disconnected from nature, spirit, and humanity" (p. 51) and that "This fundamental sense of disconnection is nowhere more vivid than our disconnection with our own bodies" (p. 52). Aposhyan (2004) believes that the roots of disconnection extend deeply into our cultural grounding, and manifests itself in detachment from our physical beings (p. 53). Hornbacher (1998) has identified such an internal/external disconnect in the memoir of her own eating disordered experiences in the following words:



We (live) in a larger world where there is also a sense of hunger and a sense of lack. We can call it loss of religion, loss of the nuclear family, loss of community, but whatever it is, it has created a deep and insatiable hunger in our collective unconscious. (p. 119).

Ensler (2013) would seem to echo the above sentiments, in her identification of our disconnection from the “body of the world” (p.7) world in which we live. Ensler (2013) proposes that the ways in which we actively disconnect from the external world are mirrored internally by the pathological disconnection erupting within ourselves, and vice versa; she suggests that the body is not so much an inner experience as a relational interaction between the internal and external. Her work is central to my own understanding of the inter-relationship between the body, culture, and nature. I derive deep meaning from Ensler’s passionate and vivid depiction of the proliferation of violence against women, which she identifies as being reflected in the disconnection buried within female bodies, and the polluting and poisoning of the natural world as mirrored in the flooding of our own inner systems with toxicity and disease (Ensler, 2013).

Several other theorists affirm that cultural context are crucial factors in the experience of an individual’s connection with the body. Orbach (2009) posits that “There has never been an altogether simple, ‘natural’ body; there has only been a body that is shaped by its social and cultural designation” (p. 9). Shusterman (2008) similarly posits that “Historically dominant hierarchies of power shape our somatic experience and define the norms of bodily being” (p. 77). Bordo’s (1993) words add further support to this argument in her declaration that “Culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (p. 17). Such an understanding is likewise reflected in Gimlin’s (2002) words that “the body is a site of oppression, not only because physically stronger individuals can overpower weaker ones but also because systems of

social control operate through it” (p.141). Gimlin (2002) additionally indicates that:

In a society that equates the body with both self and moral worth, cultural meanings are attached to physical differences, so that the body provides a foundation for oppression based on gender, class, ethnicity, and age – all social characteristics that are deeply embodied. (p. 141).

Orbach (2009) further emphasizes the impact of social and cultural influences on the body, by discussing the state of body anxiety that exists in our society, and describing how such may infiltrate our body’s experiences on a collective and individual level. She argues that we currently live in a “new epoch of body destabilisation” in which a “new franticness” (p. 9) enshrouds our experiences with our bodies, thus leading to the creation of bodies that are literally and profusely overwhelmed with anxiety. In speaking of the media influences that shape the perceptions of bodies within our culture, Orbach (2006) states that individuals struggle with our bodies “in the attempt to constitute a secure corporeality in the face of the persistent onslaught of images that make us hyper-critical of our own” (p. 170). Orbach (2009) describes the seemingly shared ideology that our bodies are never quite enough as they are; they must be obsessed over, analyzed, worked upon, tweaked, mastered, and controlled.

Because of this collective experience of body compulsion, our bodies have seemingly become objects which have turned “from the means of production to the production itself” (Orbach, 2009, p. 8), echoing Ray’s (2008) understanding, illustrated previously, of the shift in economic activity that caused the body to be altered in ability and meaning. Conger (1994) has similarly posited that the body has become a “cultural toy, a lure to entice a mate, (and) an object to possess” (p. 211). Ray (2008) further elaborates this notion by stating that “When we objectify something, when we turn it into an object for our use, we lose touch with its reality as a subject”

(p. 24). In so doing, a rupture exists between what we think of our bodies as objects, and how we experience our bodies as subjects, a topic which will be explored in more detail in a later segment.

### *Gender Experiences*

A further understanding of bodily disconnection follows from the discussion of social and cultural factors. As the literature articulates, gender plays a significant role in the formation of and understanding of the body. In an examination of the literature, I have discovered a rich body of work that, while binary in nature, meaningfully holds the experience of women in relationship to their bodies and in relationship to the world. I will now engage the perspectives of some theorists whose work has deeply influenced my own understanding of what it means to live in the world as a female, with the understanding and awareness such depictions are not inclusive of all experiences of being female, and recognizing that there is more than one binary way of being a woman.

Research reveals significant understandings of the sociocultural and sociopolitical constructions of the female body (Bordo, 1993; Budgeon, 2003; Gimlin, 2002; Justice, 1996; Orbach, 2006; Orbach, 2009; Savacool, 2009; Sinclair, 2006). Budgeon (2003) declares that the female body “has historically been constituted as that which must be defined, directed and controlled through the application of disembodied, objective, masculine knowledge” (p.37). Sinclair (2006) equally identifies that “Women’s bodies are inscribed with complex social, economic, and political meanings” (p.48). Bordo (1993) has provided a contextualized understanding of the intersecting constructs of control and gender in the experiences of the body, highlighting the dominance of sociocultural forces on the female body experience in an assertion that “Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture” (Bordo, 1993, p.142). Grounded in a feminist framework, Bordo (1993) has identified that

“Female bodies have historically been significantly more vulnerable than male bodies to extremes in . . . forms of cultural manipulation on the body” (p.143) and that the female body has essentially become “a locus of practical cultural control” (p. 183).

Orbach (2006) similarly voices an awareness of the control that culture yields over the female body. She identifies the ways in which our capitalist society seeks to manipulate the female form, creating an urge within women to fix or alter themselves – ie. their appearances and/or eating behaviours – making them feel inadequate in their natural way of being, and less than what society would inform us a woman “should” be. Examining the rampant objectification of women in our society, Orbach (2006) asserts that:

Since women are taught to see themselves from the outside as candidates for men, they become prey to the huge fashion and diet industries that first set up the ideal images and then exhort women to meet them. The message is loud and clear – the woman’s body is not her own. The woman’s body is not satisfactory as it is. (p. 17).

Orbach (2006) furthermore proposes that, trapped in a cultural obsession with shaping and re-creating the female form, “Women are caught in an attempt to conform to a standard that is externally defined and constantly changing” (p.17). In reflecting upon this intermingling of individual and collective forces in the creation and conceptualization of female bodies, I find meaning in Savacool’s (2009) declaration that:

What are women’s bodies around the world telling us today? More than anything, they tell us that they are entrenched in the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: battles over politics, religion, technology, and globalization....more than ever, our bodies tell us they are confused. *We* have confused them. (p. x).

Each of the abovementioned theorists appears to illustrate a society actively working against the female body, dividing it in two -- the body as is, and the body as it “should” be –

thus presenting an embedded duality within the body experience of women. The literature suggests that society seemingly celebrates the soma in one form – the idealized, manipulated, and controlled body – while minimizing and degrading it in another form – the body, as is. Gimlin (2002) discusses this growing divide between the ideal female form, and the reality of many women in our culture, suggesting that “The imperfect body has become a sign of an imperfect character” (p.5) and “Because most women can never achieve an ideal body, they must instead attempt to repair the flawed identities that imperfect bodies symbolize” (Gimlin, 2002, p.5). Myers and Crowther (2007) similarly affirm that “The discrepancy between the ideal body type presented by the media and society and large, and the way women perceive and experience their own bodies is so common . . . that it may actually be a normal part of the female experience for most women within Western cultures” (p.296).

The result of such cultural and social manipulation of the body, Bordo (1993) has asserted, is the formation of “docile bodies . . . whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, (and) improvement” (p. 166). Heyes (2006) voices Foucault’s understanding that “the production of ‘docile bodies’ requires coercive attention to be paid to the smallest details of the body’s functioning, partitioning its time and space under relentless surveillance” (p. 132). Constant analysis and obsession of the body causes women to “continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo, 1993, p. 166). Such a feeling and conviction is so seemingly entrenched within the lived female experience that Hornbacher (1998) has identified a commonality of obsession between women, sharing that “ “Women use their obsession with weight and food as a point of connection with one another, a commonality even between strangers. Instead of talking about why we use food and weight control as a means of handling

emotional stress, we talk ad nauseam about the fact that we don't like our bodies" (p. 283).

Social expectation is clearly a prominent theme in the exploration of the female body experience, as revealed in both the literature and in the narratives of the journeying body. Orbach (2006) suggests that this desire for women to engage in such behaviours to become thin is easily understood in our culture, as it "conforms to social expectations for women" (p. 152), and that the opposite, a woman engaging in behaviours to gain weight, would go against cultural norms, and may thus be viewed as wrong. Justice (1996) has similarly identified the grip of social expectation over the female form, from a young age, stating that :

Girls, as they move into adolescence and begin negotiating young womanhood, experience increasing disconnection from their bodies . . . . Many young girls seem to quit listening to their bodies in order to be able to adapt to what they perceive society expects of them. (p. 76).

She argues that the fact that "young women are choosing to dissociate from their bodies is a tragic loss for them individually and for us as a society" (Justice, 1996, p. 76).

### *Effects of trauma*

The experience of violence equally plays a significant role in the process of bodily disconnection, as Ensler (2013) and many other theorists reveal. The act of violence appears to have strong roots in gender, with females worldwide increasingly the victims of traumatic experiences of a physical and sexual nature. Wainrib (2006) professes that "Violence against women is universal, and no country, no matter how proud they may be of their sense of equality or liberation, is free of these behaviours" (p.37). She offers statistics from Amnesty International, who have found that "up to 70% of female murder victims are killed by their male partners . . . (and) more than 135 million girls and women have undergone female genital mutilation and an additional 2 million girls and women are at risk each year" (p.38), naming just a few of the

traumatic experiences that may affect women. Such experiences are seemingly heavily integrated within the lives of women, impacting them thus not only on a relational level, but deep within their inner body experiences, and their ways of being within the world. Ben-Shahar (2012) recognizes that such trauma “frequently tears a hole in our capacity to sustain (the) illusion of safety, exposing us to the dangerousness of the world in a manner that prevents us from occupying it in an embodied way” (p.9).

The literature affirms that, no matter the genre of traumatic experience, the bodily system profoundly feels its impact (Emerson & Hopper, 2011; Levine, 1997; Levine, 2010; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Rothschild, 2000; Shapiro, 2006; Stanek, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma is thus posited as a threat to the holistic experience of an individual, such as it is deeply impactful to the bodymind system. Traumatic experiences of all types, most particularly those in which an individual’s body space is threatened or invaded by another, may ultimately sever or at the very least dramatically weaken connection between the body and mind, and between the self and the world. As Rothschild (2000) relays, trauma is a “psychophysical experience, even when the traumatic event causes no direct body harm” (p. 5), thus affecting both the psyche as well as the soma.

The process of mind-body separation as the result of trauma is well explored within the literature. Many theorists have articulated that, during or after a traumatic experience, the mind may naturally dissociate from the body in order to protect the individual from fully experiencing the effects of the trauma (Ben-Shahar, 2012; Levine, 1997; Levine, 2010; Rothschild, 2000; Wainrib, 2006). Levine (1997) has discussed the impact of trauma on the bodymind by explaining that “The dynamic of trauma . . . cuts us off from our internal experience as a way of protecting our organisms from sensations and emotions that could be overwhelming” (p. 73). Rothschild (2000) affirms that such a split between the body and mind is “an instinctive response

to save the self from suffering” (p. 13). Yet, in dissociating and cutting off from our “internal experience”, as Levine (1997) has identified, we separate ourselves from our embodied experiences, as detailed earlier in the context of emotions, thus potentially severing the connection between the body and mind.

Such a detachment may continue long after the traumatic incident has ended, as individuals may hold the effects of the trauma – the residual anxiety, shock, and fear – within their bodies. Ogden, Minton, and Pain (2006) suggest that individuals who have experienced trauma become detached from body sensations and are unable to experience their bodies as they did prior to the trauma, long after the traumatic experience has passed (p. 16). Baum (2013) speaks to the somatic holding of trauma experiences, suggesting that “The trauma event collapses time in the body” (p.35), and that the body thus remains stuck in the traumatic experience.

Stanek (2005) posits that such trapped sensations and emotions “inhabit the body as ghosts from the past, ready to come to life again in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or sensorimotor responses” (p.97), somatically haunting an individual beyond the actual event. Levine (1997) attributes such somatic repercussions of trauma to the “undischarged energy” (p. 134) within the bodily system. He offers a juxtaposition between the evolutionary response of animals to trauma, in which they immediately shake their bodies to release anxious energy, and the response of humans, who tend to hold on to the anxious energy and unconsciously bury it within the body. Levine’s insights on the nature of this trapped energy is paramount to my own understanding of how trauma is held in the body, and the interventions necessary in order to bring the body back into alignment with the mind following a traumatic incident.



My inquiry into the experience of disconnection from the body is hence situated within the context of the five understandings described above: early attachment experiences, emotional repression or minimization, sociocultural influences, gender experiences, and the effects of violence and trauma as held within and remembered by the body. Collectively, these understandings provide a broad landscape from which to explore bodily disconnection, offering different frameworks and lenses from which to understand participants' experiences of detachment from their bodily selves. While articulating the differences between these perspectives, similarities are also apparent. The psychological notions of attachment and repression, for example, highlight the impact of emotions on an individual's sense of body. Insecure attachment mirrors the process of emotional repression in that in neither case are emotions freely expressed or shared, and a stifling or stunting of the flow of energy may result.

The three sociocultural theories presented are interrelated as well. The concept of culture and society becomes more firmly developed with a discussion of gender and its related issues. Similarly, a discussion of gender and its relationship to the body experience is further supported by voicing an experience that is often associated with it: violence, and its resulting traumatic effects. Through connecting these three influences, the experiences of women living in a patriarchal, anxiety-ridden, and often violent society are illuminated, and the experience of bodily disconnection is deeply contextualized.

As previously noted, my research is interested in exploring the experiences of women as they shift from an experience or space of disconnection to connection with their body, and the meanings and understandings that they derive from this movement or transition. In this study, the participants define what the concept of disconnection means from their own perspective, coloured by personal dynamic insights, experiences, and locations. It is thus the meanings and

feelings behind the lived experiences of the women that meaningfully inform this research.

While this inquiry is concerned primarily with the experiences of the women as they journey towards a sense of relationship with their bodies, being informed on the concept of bodily disconnection illuminates contexts out of which bodily connection may arise. An exploration of the experiences of the women as they disconnect from their bodies brings forth a fuller, more deeply nuanced understanding of the experiences of their journeying body. Understandings of the processes of disconnection are thus an essential component of this study. This knowledge assists in contextualizing women's experiences and our dialogue of these experiences, during the interview process, within the larger socio-cultural and theoretical landscapes in which we are all situated: myself as researcher, and them as participants. Of equal importance are the notions and understandings articulated by the women in the study, based on their lived experiences, supporting the emergence of potentially new understandings of the process of bodily disconnection, and thus adding to the evolving literature in this field.

This research is supported by a hermeneutic framework, which involves an examination of texts as an important element in the research process (Debesay, Naden & Slettebo, 2008). An exploration of the literature in the area of bodily disconnection forms part of the hermeneutic circle, which is central to this inquiry, as will be discussed in the methodology chapter. The literature informing this research gives a rich understanding of varied experiences of bodily disconnection, and provides a starting place to examine the experiences of the journeying body in its movement towards connection.

### Experiences of connection

The experience of connection with the body may similarly hold multiple meanings and interpretations by individuals, and such a process may also be constructed and perceived in various ways. In reviewing the literature, I have come across many descriptions of the process of connection that highlight differences and nuances in understanding and experience. In the last section, I identified the difference in understanding between those theorists who believe that connection with the body is inherent, and those who believe that the mind and body are naturally separate. In this section, I explore primarily the understandings of those theorists who align themselves with the former belief: the innate union between the body and mind.

The literature widely engages the word “embodiment” in its conceptualization of body connection. Ray (2008) proposes that embodiment is an experience of awakening into awareness, in his declaration that:

To be fully embodied means to be at one with who we are, in every respect, including our physical being, our emotions, and the totality of our karmic situation. It is to be entirely present to who we are and to the journey of our own becoming. (p. xv).

Aposhyan (2004) describes the experience of embodiment as “the moment to moment process by which human beings allow awareness to enhance the flow of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and energies through our bodily selves” (p. 53). She suggests that “Embodiment implies an unencumbered flow of life through us” (p. 53) and that “Embodiment . . . is a grounding and flowing relationship between ourselves and the rest of the world” (Aposhyan, 2004, p.53).

Conger (1994) has explored the experience of embodiment in comparable terms, by proposing that “To be embodied means to . . . establish a clear, energetic flow, to connect the

split off pieces so we are whole and in contact with ourselves and others” (p. 195). Cortright (2007) describes the experience as being in a “more vibrant, sensorily alive state, a state with the joy, beauty, and pleasure that is the glory of embodiment” (p. 20). This depiction echoes the descriptions of Conger and Aposhyan in likening the process of embodiment to a sense of being “alive to the sensory world . . . a sense of rootedness in physical being with breathing freely supporting the energetic excitement of our feeling life coursing through our body” (Cortright, 2007, p. 76).

The experience of embodiment has been suggested to begin at birth, at which time we exit the body experience of another, with which we have been connected for some time, and enter into our own; we must now develop a sense of what it means to be within our own physical space and formulate a sense of our own personal embodied identity. Kabat-Zinn (2009) discusses the innate nature of bodily connection in relationship to the experience of birth, professing that “Everybody’s original experiences of life were, literally, even biologically, experiences of connectedness and oneness. Each of us came into the world through the body of another being. We all bear the sign of that connectedness” (p. 223). Chrisman (1997) has viscerally described the embodied nature of the birth experience through her words, “whether by cracking, by slicing, by oozing, by tearing, or by pushing. Some woman has opened, some woman has cried. This I know from my body” (p. 59). In her relational interpretation of the birth experience, Diamond (2001) proposes that “When I enter the world, my body is not cut off from another person’s body. Rather, I enter a shared space in which I experience my body with the others’ bodies and I discover my own gestures in theirs” (p. 50).

The birth experience, while on the one hand inviting the growth of connection with the body, may also inspire a feeling of disconnect, which may be the grounding place from which connection is born. Moon (1997) has postulated that the process of birth is the initial experience of disconnection that we encounter, being removed from the corporal experience of another with whom we lived for the first months of our existence. She has posited that, “From then on, our life is defined by a longing for reconnection” (Moon, 1997, p. 223). Lowe & Laeng-Gilliatt (2007) similarly state that:

Until birth we had no experience of distance: of the possibility of falling, of the sound of something not adjacent to us, of warmth either coming to us or going from us. No wonder that on entering the world outside we clutched at the breast, with its soft tissues like our own. . . in this new world, it was for the first time possible . . . to be alone: mother might be here or absent. (p.6).

In becoming aware of our own individual body space after birth, and in re-developing the sense of connectedness that we had previously enjoyed in-utero, Norberg-Hodge (1997) has opined that “This process of reconnection can be messy, painful, and difficult, but it brings much joy and peace” (p. 82).

Contemplating the perspectives of the aforementioned theorists, we may extract a few core understandings of what some of the literature articulates as the innate experience of bodily connection . To illustrate, both Ray (2008) and Aposhyan (2004) describe their understanding of somatic connection as a cultivation of awareness and presence. These authors each emphasize bodily connection as being a holistic experience, one in which elements of the whole self are integrated, rather than simply a corporeal experience in which the body is the sole focus. This

interpretation illuminates the process of bodily connection as being not just of body, but of thoughts, feelings, and energies as well, thus centering on the totality of an individual.

Aposhyan (2004) and Conger (1994) have added further depth to this meaning by describing the synergistic flow of energy within the body as a dynamic movement that not only unites the pieces of one's self, but also establishes a link between an individual and the outside world. These two theorists envision the role that bodily connection plays in creating cohesion internally, within the self, and externally, within the world. Cortright's (2007) depiction of bodily connection, highlighted earlier in this segment, similarly resonates this lively flow of energy. Colour is injected into his depiction, painting vibrant sensory images that mirror the positive, joyful understanding that he presumably harbours of bodily connection.

#### *Understandings of connection*

As with bodily disconnection, so too is the field of bodily connection filled with various meanings and ways of understanding this somatic experience. In focusing on five interpretations of bodily connection articulated in the literature, I will now describe bodily connection as an integrative experience grounded in the following concepts: a present moment awareness of the lived experiences of the body through the integration of body and mind (Bois, 2009; Cortright, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Leder, 1990; Shapiro, 2002; Tollifson, 1997); an honouring of the voices and stories of the body (Bois, 2009; Conger, 1994; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Ray, 2008; Shapiro, 2002; Thanas, 1997); an acceptance of the embodied experiences, or feelings, arising in the body (Caldwell, 1996; Conger, 1994; Cortright, 2007; Ray, 2008); an understanding of the body as a subjective experience (Csepregi, 2006; Csordas, 2002; Finlay, 2006, Skar, Miller & Gard, 2010; Hudak, McKeever & Wright, 2007; Kepner, 1993; Mauss, 1934; McNay, 1999; Merleau-Ponty,

1962; Shusterman, 2008; Thomas, 2003; Zabriskie, 2006); and an appreciation of the connection between mind, body, spirit, and beingness in the world (Aposhyan, 2004; Conger, 1993; Csordas, 2002; Finlay, 2006; Justice, 1996; Norberg-Hodge, 1997; Orbach, 2003; Plummer, 2012; Ray, 2008; Zabriskie, 2006).

### *Bodymind unity*

In the previous section, I conceptualized the experience of bodily disconnection as one in which an imposed split occurs to disrupt the natural unity between the body and the mind. This is a prime point at which to begin the discussion of bodily connection, as it is my belief that the experience of bodily connection involves the process of re-uniting the mind and the body, and thus, re-forging the natural link between the psyche and the soma. The literature reveals that many theorists are also in alignment with this understanding. As Lowen (1976) has proclaimed, we are now “witnessing a new respect for the body and are moving away from the old dichotomy that saw mind and body as two separate and distinct entities” (as cited in Wainrib, 2006, p.105), towards a more cohesive understanding of the interconnecting dynamics that unite the two.

Connection with the body is postulated to arise as one becomes aware of the interrelationship between the body and mind (Aposhyan, 2004; Caldwell, 1997; Cortright, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Ray, 2008; Ressler, 2009; Shapiro, 2002; Tollifson, 1997). Such a vital relationship is expressed in Ressler’s (2009) affirmation that “Body and mind are interrelated parts that form a cohesive whole” ( p.145). Ressler (2009) describes the simultaneous engagement of the body and mind as “bodymind integration”, which is illustrated as a highly visceral experience. According to this author, as “Our emotions and experiences are imprinted cognitively through our thoughts and language; they are imprinted physiologically in the very

cells, organs, and musculature of the body” (Ressler, 2009, p.146).

In exploring the concept of bodymind, Shapiro (2002) also encourages the perspective of the body and mind as one, professing that “There is no separation between what is happening in our minds, and what is happening in our bodies; relatively we do not exist separate to the body in which we have our existence” (p.2). Furthermore, she shares that “The bodymind matrix reflects psychological and somatic harmony: the body is simply a gross manifestation of the subtlety of the mind” (p.3), thus bringing both the mind and body into the presence of the lived experience. The words of Bois (2009) echo such, describing the body as “the tangible agent through which the immediacy of being is deeply felt and experienced” (p. xvi). Leder (1990) has likewise posited that the “body is always a field of immediately lived sensation” (p.23).

#### *Somatic awareness*

Kabat-Zinn (2009) emphasizes the role of mindful attention in cultivating awareness of our bodily selves, affirming that “When we work systematically to bring our undivided attention to the body . . . we are literally increasing our connectedness with it. We know our body better as a result. We trust it more, (and) we read its signals more accurately.” (p. 230). Cortright (2007) further affirms that in being attentive to who we are physically being in the world, we are able to feel what it means to be within a body, as opposed to simply being within our head, or, as Ray (2008) describes it, living as “brains on a stick” (p. 41). Tollifson (1997) has relayed that, in becoming mindful of our body, we become aware of its expansiveness and fluidity. She proposes that “It is in fully meeting whatever appears as pure sensation . . . that we discover the emptiness of form – the undivided wholeness of being that has no solidity, no boundaries, no limits” (Tollifson, 1997, p.18), thus facilitating a movement beyond the physical nature of the body, to



its connectedness with others and with the world. It is through being mindfully aware of our physicality, of who we are somatically being in this world, that we become more in tune with our body's sensations and experiences, more able to respond to its desires and needs, and more appreciative of the expansive nature of who we are as embodied beings.

The literature describes the body as a being of infinite wisdom, and communicates with us through signs, symptoms, and sensations (Bois, 2009; Gendlin, 1978; Harrington, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Ray, 2008; Shapiro, 2002; Thanas, 1997). We are hence able to develop a connection with our body through honouring its voice, listening to its messages, and hearing its story. Bois (2009) respects the wisdom of the body's voice, celebrating the "intelligent body, which offers its own answers without the filter of reasoned thought" (p.119). While Thanas (1997) has claimed that "Long ago we turned off the voice of the body. The body obediently went silent as we agreed not to notice our emotional or feeling life" (p.43), she has also affirmed that the body cannot stay silent forever, and that "There comes a time when the body finally needs to speak out, in its own voice, to catch our attention" (Thanas, 1997, p.43).

In paying attention to the body's voice and wisdom, important embodied information enters our awareness. As Conger (1994) has shown, "When we can read the body's story, a history consciously unfolds which would not be available to us otherwise" (p. 90), and it is through actively and mindfully listening to our body's communication that we are able to access such vital information. Ray (2008) similarly professes that, in listening to the voice of the body as it somatically speaks to us, "The body becomes a teacher, one that does not communicate in words but tends to speak out of the shadows through sensations, feelings, images, and somatic memories" (p. 60). He proclaims the body as "the ultimate teacher, the

trusted guide on the journey” (Ray, 2008, p. 95), as long as “we are able to receive its wisdom” (Ray, 2008, p.95). Panhofer & Payne (2011) recognize this challenge of fully understanding and articulating the voice of the body, however, purporting that “Putting the embodied experience into words seems to have its limitations since so much more seems to be stored in the body which cannot be worded in this way at all” (p.226).

An appreciation of the body’s voice thus invites the emergence of the unspoken. As Bois (2009) suggests, “The body speaks of old things, sometimes forgotten, sometimes lost, but nevertheless, of things that are still there. It speaks also of the future, of what is asking to be born, to be, and to become” (p. 168). Harrington (2008) terms this the “talking body” or “the body that speaks”: “One that can converse with its owner, conveying messages to her about things going on in her life that she is having difficulty consciously confronting” (p.68). She furthermore proposes that “What it (the body) speaks about are often precisely those things that the conscious mind would most wish left unsaid” (p.73) and that the body thereby acts as a “mute narrator” (p.75) for unshared memories, feelings, and stories. All that we are, and everything that we have experienced, is seemingly written and recorded within our bodily systems, manifesting, as Shapiro (2002) relays, in the ways in which our bodies “move, function and operate; we are the sum total of all that has happened to us” (p.5). Indeed, Shapiro (2002) indicates that:

The body actually retains everything it has ever experienced – all the events, emotions, stresses and pains are locked within the bodily system . . . our bodies become like a walking autobiography, muscle and flesh formations reflecting our experiences, injuries, worries, anxieties, and attitudes. (p.5).

We are hence able to read the body's narrative through listening to what it is saying to us, physically and non-verbally, through the medium of symptoms, sensations, intuition, and feelings. "Physical symptoms", Kabat-Zinn (2009) has observed, "are messages the body is giving us that allow us to know how it is doing and what its needs are" (p. 26). He posits that "When we are more in touch with our body as a result of paying attention to it systematically, we will be far more attuned to what it is telling us and better equipped to respond appropriately" (p. 26). Orbach (2009) similarly understands the importance of hearing the messages of the "symptomatic body as a signal of body that is struggling to express itself and its needs" (p. 93). To strengthen the connection with our body, we must listen attentively to its sensations and symptoms, understand the value in its messages, and honour its inherent wisdom, even if we find it challenging to put such wisdom into words. Thanas (1997) has highlighted the complexity of such listening, offering that "This deep listening takes sincere effort" (p.47), sharing that:

Sometimes the voice is so buried I despair of getting through to it...I imagine I am digging a tunnel with my bare hands, not knowing how deep is the dirt I must dig through or whether my hands will be strong enough to do it. It takes patience, stamina, a willingness to find nothing, to listen acutely with the ear of intuition, the ear of concentration" (Thanas, 1997, p.47).

The process of listening to the body – an integral element of the body's journey towards connection – will be further examined in the findings and discussion chapter.

### *Acceptance of emotions*

Through awareness of the body and acknowledgement of its voice, an acceptance of the body and its emotional experiences may arise: this is the third understanding of the process of bodily connection that I will describe. Emotions are of significance in the process of bodily connection. As highlighted in the previous section on disconnection, many theorists postulate that emotions are somatic experiences, as they are of the body and in the body (Bois, 2009; Caldwell, 1997; Cortright, 2007; Ogden, Minton & Pain, 2006; Ressler, 2009; Roy, 2008; Shapiro, 2002; Shusterman, 2008). Ressler (2009) identifies emotions as “integrally, an experience of the body, interpreted and labeled by the mind” (p.154). Caldwell (1997) has shown that feelings are “generally equated with sensation and with the pulmonary flow of energy inside the body. It is an occurrence within the boundaries of the self that is the raw data of our experience and our sense of who we are” (p.9). Ray (2008) likewise appreciates the somatic nature of emotions by proposing that they “arise out of the darkness of the body, they are felt intensely in the body, and they call us – sometimes with great insistence and even grisly intensity – back into the body” (p. 31). He further affirms the somatic nature of emotions by stating that “To be fully embodied involves an unconditional presence to our emotional life” (Ray, 2008, p. 31).

The somatic nature of emotions and the role they play in the processes of bodily disconnection and connection is thus evident. The body is viewed as the ultimate score keeper of emotional experiences, as van der Kolk (2014) suggests: somatic memory, embedded within the cells, keeps record of the emotions experienced within the body. Whereas mental memory may not consistently be reliable, the wisdom of the body and the power of its emotional memory

seems to endure. Such is apparent in Conger's (1994) insight that "The body teaches us that no persistent feeling is ever lost. Its path is meticulously recorded in flaccid or contracted tissue. No split off feeling escapes the body's net of tissue" (p. 143). Such a description echoes the words of Levine (1997) in his depiction of the burying of trauma within the bodily system, as earlier discussed.

In respecting the memory that the body holds, a person may thus reclaim her body by embracing emotional experiences as they move within and throughout her body, thereby allowing her soma to integrate its emotions fully. By giving the body the permission and space to truly and completely *feel* -- as opposed to react, dissociate, or deny -- one is able to heal the divide between body and mind. In her work with clients with eating disorders, Ressler (2009) emphasizes that "Reclaiming the forsaken body means a return to real feelings, which can be identified, experienced, and expressed" (p.157). Cortright (2007) similarly discusses the strength that arises once we accept the emotional experiences of our body, declaring that:

To be able to rest in our own emotional experience, to be grounded in our fundamental openness to the world without barriers or defenses, is a stance of immense power, for we are then rooted in our depths, unshaken by passing storms on the surface. (p. 121).

Another understanding of bodily connection evokes a vision of the body as a subjective experience: a living and breathing entity that actively engages in the world, in contrast to a passive, objectified receptacle that simply exists within the world. There has been significant debate in the literature regarding the role of the body as either passive, external object or active, living subject. Additionally, arguments supporting the dual or co-existing nature of the body as both subject and object are similarly found in the literature (Csepregi, 2006; Csordas, 2002;

Hudak, McKeever & Wright, 2007; Kepner, 1993; Mauss, 1934; McNay, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Shusterman, 2008; Totton, 2010).

### *Subjective experiencing*

There are many theorists who conceptualize the body as a subjective experience, in contrast to the construct of objectification, as was explored previously. Csepregi, for example, (2006) encourages a shift in perception, from the contemplation of the body purely “as an instrument, a machine, or an object of possession that responds to, or resists, challenges” to a consideration of the body “as a partner” (p. 150) throughout life’s journey. Equally Kepner (1993) has insisted that “The body must become the subject of experience so that the split between body and mind can be healed” (p. 113).

Other theorists, however, perceive of the body as a more expansive experience than such a binary or dualistic approach would invite; thus, through this encompassing lens, the body may be viewed as both subject and object, or even existing in a space beyond such a dichotomous model. This co-dwelling nature of the body as both subject and object is apparent in the proposal of Mauss (1934) that the body is both “the original object upon which the work of culture is carried out and the original tool with which that work is achieved” ( as cited in Csordas, 2002, p. 62), thus encouraging an approach of simultaneous objectification and subjectified experiencing. Merleau-Ponty (1962) has strengthened this proposition, sharing the understanding of the body as a living object actively engaging in a subjective experience. Shusterman (2008) would seem to agree with this duality, in his understanding of the body as both a “subjective sensibility that experiences the world, and as an object perceived in that world” (p. 3). So, too, would Hudak, McKeever and Wright (2007), whose vision of the very nature of embodiment includes

“simultaneously having and being a body” (p. 32). Totton (2010) expands upon this notion, recognizing the body from three perspectives: “the body as something we have (the body as object), as something we are (the body as subject), and as something we become (the body as process and performativity)” (p.22).

The expansive nature of the body is similarly represented in the words of McNay (1999), who has contemplated the body as:

a dynamic, mutable frontier . . . the threshold through which the subject’s lived experience of the world is incorporated and realised and, as such, is neither pure object nor pure subject. It is neither pure object since it is the place of one’s engagement with the world. Nor is it pure subject in that there is always a material residue that resists incorporation into dominant symbolic schema. (p.98).

A similar depiction is found in the words of Hudak, McKeever & Wright, 2007, of “the body as a dynamic, organic site of meaningful experience rather than as a physical object distinct from the self and mind” (p. 32). Zabriskie (2006) likewise conceptualizes the body as “the ground of self-experience, the knower of pleasure, the carrier of relationship, the instrument of creation and procreation” (p.70), thus providing further support to the expansiveness of the body experience.

That the body is embedded within the world is clearly a key concept in this expansive and experiential perspective of the body. The understanding of body-in-relationship-to-world is well-grounded within the literature (Finlay, 2006; Gyllensten, Skar, Miller & Gard, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). As a physical grounding of the self, the body is perceived by many to be the positioning from which we are rooted and from which location we interact with the world. Finlay (2006) professes that, “I do not simply possess a body, I AM my body. My lived body is

an embodied consciousness that engages the world” (p.20). These words echo the insight of Merleau-Ponty (1962) that the body and the world are intertwined, as evident in his declaration that “I am conscious of my body via the world (just as) I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body” (p.82). For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the body is “simply my point of view of the world” (p. 70).

Gyllensten, Skar, Miller and Gard (2010) similarly identify the collaborative engagement of the body and world, affirming that “We exist in our world through our bodies” (p. 440). These authors assert that “The world is perceived as we perceive it through our bodies; from this perspective the body cannot be reduced to a mere object” (p.440). Thomas (2003) likewise offers that “The body is not simply a house for the mind, rather it is through our lived experience of our bodies that we perceive of, are informed by and interact with the world” (p.29). The body is thus viewed as a “biological, material entity” (Csordas, 2002, p. 241) that may live in an objectified world and engages in a subjective experience therein (Gyllensten, Skar, Miller & Gard, 2010). In discussing the work of Abram (1996), Finlay (2006) similarly affirms that “The experiencing body is not an enclosed object, but an open, incomplete, participatory, sensuous dimension of Being. The body fluidly merges into the world” (p. 21). According to Abram (1996), the body is thus “a creative, shape-shifting entity” (p. 47), an image that brings with it life and energy, and the ability to expand and change in relationship to the external.

The shift from disconnection to connection with the body hence encompasses a shift in understanding of the body: from an objective standpoint, or body as object, to a more postmodern appreciation of the body as an experiencing subject, and an opening to the expansive contemplation of the body as existing beyond such a binary perspective, co-existing



and co-dwelling in the same physical space. The understanding of the body as engaging in an expansive experience invites us to become actively engaged in the world, through a solid foundation within our own physical self.

*Relationship with the inner and outer*

In appreciating the body as a subjective being, in being aware of the ways in which we are often objectified or treated as objects within the world, and in fully interacting with the world through the energetic medium of the body, we may feel a sense of connection and understanding, not simply within our own self, but within the broader context as well, within the natural and social world in which we live. Another understanding of bodily connection thereby arises: a deepening of our relationship to the inner world of the self and the outer world of the community. As Moon (1997) has encouraged, we need our “individual body to get to the big body of the universe” (p. 228). Ray (2008) likewise affirms that “To fully inhabit our bodies . . . is to discover our embeddedness in the world. We are not above the world at all . . . but are embedded within it, interdependent with other people, animals, and the natural world itself” (p. 25).

The sense of being in the world is thus another essential element of bodily connection. Orbach (2003) emphasizes the importance of inter-relationships in the formation of one’s own personal relationship with the body, bringing forth the idea, as previously explored, that “The body is not a thing in and of itself”, but that it “is only made in relationship” (p.28). The body is perceived in this way as a relational being that cannot develop in isolation. Through the conceptualization of the body as a relational experience, arises the appreciation, as Diamond (2001) relays, that “The body is always in an interpersonal context with others” (p. 41) and that

optimal development requires an “interpersonal differentiated body space” that is respected and honoured (p. 60). Plummer (2012) furthers this argument of body-in-relation in her affirmation that:

The meanings of bodies can be found through interactive processes – they emerge out of interactions. The embodied self is a process built out of encounters and endowed with shifting meaning. Bodies assume their meanings according to how they are handled in joint actions. Social groups are ceaselessly involved in negotiating the meanings of bodies. (p. 78).

In addition to shaping the way in which an individual exists within the world and in relationship with others, the literature also articulates the far-reaching impacts of connection with the body, beyond the physical plane, in an exploration of the body in the context of spirit. Certain theorists agree that connection with the body may extend outwards, to facilitate connection with the spirit (Conger, 1993; Lowen, 1990; Phillips, 2005; Phillips, 2011; Ray, 2008; Roth, 1997; Roth, 1998; Sobczak, 2014). The body is thus conceptualized as a vessel of the spirit, or the medium through which the spirit is brought forth in the world. Conger (1993) has affirmed this understanding in his proposal that “The body structures the reality that spirit enters” (p. 196) and that “Our bodies can lead us to the deep understanding of spiritual embodiment” (p. 253). Sobczak (2014) likewise encourages that “choosing to live consciously in our bodies and thereby giving our spirits a physical home” (p. 17) is an integral element in the process of becoming embodied.

Ray (2008) also appreciates the connection between the soma and spirit, suggesting that through developing a connection with our body, “We find that we have a partner on the spiritual

path that we didn't know about – our own body” (p. 60). Justice (1996) has additionally proclaimed that “Recovering your body can be a spiritual journey . . . having a connection with some transcendent Presence, something that is larger than you and contains you” (p. 44). Clearly, although the experience of bodily connection may appear to be physical in nature, its impacts extend into a metaphysical realm, beyond the physical boundary of the skin, adding further depth to the understanding of the body as an expansive experience.

Connection with the body is thus presented in the literature as a process of multiple meanings and layers: from the cell, which holds somatic memory, to the emotions, whose energy flows between the muscles and tissues, to the spirit, who resides within the physical shell, and to the community, which is strengthened and empowered through collective experiences of connection between the body and mind. Just as it is in the nature of emotions to fluctuate and flow, so too does the energy of connection shift from one cell, one person, and one spirit to another. The interconnection between body/mind/self/others/world is illuminated by the following words of Sutherland (1997), in her depiction of the power arising through the collaboration of intersecting parts of the whole:

The physical body, intimate with itself as substance, matter, flesh and blood; the spirit body, intimate with other spirit bodies; the empty body, intimate with its own Buddha nature. All sick, all well, all alive, and all dead. All held in the great shining body of the world, and already true, if we can just remember it. (p.9).

## Experiences of transition

The previous sections of this literature review have explored energetic and nuanced understandings of the experiences of bodily disconnection and connection. The transitional space between, across, and through these two processes is of equal significance for the journeying body, as it is within these spaces that we are able to perceive changes, movement, and growth. The transitory experiences also provide a vantage point for viewing the processes of disconnection and connection in all of their colour, meaning, and form. In this section, I will identify several important theories of development that explore the dynamic processes of growth, change, and transition, that illustrate the winding paths that one may experience throughout the lifespan, in an endeavour to shine further light upon the shifting experiences of the journeying body.

In exploring the concept of transition, it is wise to discuss a construct that is often used in conjunction with this term, but that in actuality refers to a unique process: change. While change and transition may be perceived as complementary processes, the literature reveals that these are not strictly interchangeable, as each concept has its own distinct and essential features (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Brammer, 1992; Bridges, 2003; Hudson, 1991). Bridges (2003) differentiates between change and transition by suggesting that the former is highly situational in nature, whereas the latter is strongly rooted in psychology, and may show up differently in an individual's life, bringing with it potentially far-lasting impacts.

As Bridges (2003) purports, "Situational change hinges on the new thing, but psychological transition depends on letting go of the old reality and the old identity you had before the change took place" (p.7). Transition, Bridges (2003) asserts, comprises the

internalization of change, and the acceptance of the newness that is brought about (p.7).

Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) similarly identify the process of transition as being “any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p.39), reiterating the understanding of the emergence of the new. These theorists seem to postulate that it is not just the change experience itself that is important or impactful, but rather its lingering effects on an individual’s identity and way of being.

Hudson (1991) has offered forth a description of the transitional process, proposing the metaphor that, if life is a river, then transitions are “the white waters of the river” (p. 51) which cause individuals to “slide over and rapids and swirl about in unforeseen directions” (Hudson, 1991, p.51). This image corresponds well with the musings of Brammer (1992), who has defined transition “as a sharp discontinuity with previous life events” (p. 239), thereby similarly creating the visual of edges jutting forward, as if rocks in a stream. Whereas change may be portrayed by certain theorists as the rock that has been dropped in the river, and that has an impact on the flow of the river for a certain time but does not ultimately guide the direction of the movement, transitions are perceived to be the ripples of energy that surge onwards, and that move the flow from one place to the next.

Transition is thereby conceptualized as an evolving process that continues its movement after change has occurred, impacting the whole of an individual (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Brammer, 1992; Bridges, 2003; Hudson, 1991). It is this perception that facilitates my own understanding of the transition experience, as I explore the expansive and evolving experiences of the journeying body. I have engaged the juxtaposition between change and transition to highlight the movement process of the bodily journey, rather than any stagnant

resistance in flow. This research centers on the transitions of the journeying body as it moves and shifts throughout the narratives of women. It explores the ripples of transitions that the women experience – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and sexually – as they navigate challenges and changes within their bodily selves. While the experiences of the body form the focus of this inquiry, I am interested not only in the physical experiences, but rather the psychological, the emotional, and other integrative experiences which comprise the totality of the women as embodied beings. Thus, the rippling and evolving nature of transition is paramount to this study.

#### Modernist understandings of development and transition

The exploration of transitions in the body's life journey may be facilitated by several well-known psychological theories. I have chosen to highlight certain theories of development with the intent of framing the nature of transitions within the context of the development of an individual across the lifespan. This exploration begins by showcasing a few modernist theories of development, and will then shift into a broader postmodern understanding of development, with which my research profoundly aligns.

Firstly is an exploration of certain traditional perspectives of development. These are modern models that demonstrate the relatively precise and expected stages through which individuals are postulated to move throughout the journey of their life. Included within the modernist framework is Levinson (1978; 1996), a developmental theorist whose research focuses on proposed key development transitions in life that are linked with chronological age. His approach is situated in the understanding that individuals pass through new transitional periods marked by unique changes, challenges, and tasks. Levinson (1996) centers on the notion of order

throughout the lifespan, packaged in periods of time which he refers to as “eras” (p. 17).

According to Levinson (1978), new eras of change arise approximately once every twenty years, with each of these transitional stages lasting between four to seven years. His theory explains that neither of the stages is more complicated or taxing than the others, and that neither can be passed through any more quickly than the others; they are all of equal importance, and occur within every adult’s life at pre-structured times. Levinson (1978) proposes that change and transition are hence naturally-occurring phenomena encompassing specific developmental tasks, which all adults ultimately encounter in similar ways, at relatively precise times, throughout the lifespan.

Levinson’s theory is inspired by that of another modernist developmental theorist, Erikson, who has presented a more expansive approach to the examination of life transitions. Erikson’s theory does not place emphasis on chronological age, but rather sets forth eight rather broad stages of life that we all seemingly pass through at our own time and pace (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009). Each of these stages is marked by particular conflicts that require emotional processing and that stimulate psychosocial development (Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009). According to this theory, an individual’s wellbeing and adjustment to adulthood depends on the ability of an individual to negotiate the conflicts presented to them at each stage (Allen & Wergin, 2009). Dunkel and Sefcek (2009) highlight the understanding of a continuum of stages that happens at salient times of an individual’s life, rather than a strict categorization of stages that happen at distinct ages, as Levinson’s developmental approach has suggested. Equally important in Erikson’s theory is his appreciation of the social and cultural influences that shape human development, as well as his emphasis on the nurturing influence of relationships on personality

and identity development throughout each of the psychosocial stages (Slater, 2003).

Of these two theories, it is to this latter approach that I gravitate the most strongly, in my belief that developmental transitions are dynamic and unique processes that cannot be attached to precise ages or structures. I feel that it is Erikson's approach that gives the most flexibility to the individuality of life experiences. Additionally, like Erikson, I am appreciative of the shaping influences of relationship, society, and culture to the unfolding of our lives. However, I am mindful of not being grounded within the modernist stage perspective of either Erikson nor Levinson, rather choosing to align myself with a more postmodern approach to development, one that favours flow and individuation, and respects the shifting of unique journeys.

#### Postmodern understandings of development and transition

A postmodern perspective is appreciated in exploring the multiple shifts and realities of the body as individuals journey from, between, across, and through experiences of disconnection and connection. Such an expansive lens embraces the fluid nature of transitions, rather than pigeonholing them or classifying them into distinct categories, as modernist theories seemingly strive to do. While traditional theories of development discuss transitions and changes in rigid, predictable, pre-ordained terms, the postmodern paradigm welcomes openness and flexibility of experiences, recognizing the unanticipated and idiosyncratic nature of transitions and changes (Bauman, 2000; Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000; Morss, 1996; Sumara, Davis & Laidlaw, 2001). I will now discuss several elements of postmodern theories of development that inform my own understanding of transition, including fluidity of movements, acceptance of multiple experiences and realities, meaning making through experiences, and development as embedded within the relational context.



### *Fluidity of movements*

In exploring the shifting experiences of the journeying body, and endeavouring to understand more fully the ways in which such fluctuating experiences impact our identities and lives, my understanding is informed particularly by the post-modern perspective of Bauman (2000). His construct of “liquid modernity” highlights the variable nature of modern life, presenting the fluidity with which we now seem to conduct our lives, being neither fully here nor there, nor grasping hold to stability or permanency. Our actions and behaviour seemingly resemble the shifting movement of fluids, which, Bauman (2000) identifies, “cannot easily hold their shape” and thus “neither fix space nor bind time” (p.2). Bauman (2000) shares his understanding that:

Fluids travel easily. They ‘flow’, ‘spill’, ‘run out’, ‘splash’, ‘pour over’, ‘leak’, ‘flood’, ‘spray’, ‘drip’, ‘seep’, ‘ooze’; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others. (p. 2).

I believe this to be an apt metaphor for the shifting of lived experiences, the twists and turns that shape the directions of our lives, and the movement with which we travel along our life’s journey, each shift of which is similarly reflected within the totality of our journeying body’s experiences.

Bauman’s (2000) arguments give nuanced meaning to the experiences of shifts and fluctuations that are apparent in the narratives of the journeying body. He discusses the experience of disconnection as a facet of modern life, emphasizing the notions of dissolution and disintegration, and the breaking down of choices, patterns, structures, relationships, and

communication as the result of changes in society's framework. Bauman (2000) suggests that the individual life path has morphed into one that is variable and changing, in which "stable orientation points . . . by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided . . . are nowadays in increasingly short supply" (p.7). Coming from a system in which structure and stability were formerly the guiding forces, we now seemingly exist in a world that is changing, and, at times, shaky and insecure.

With such a shift, Bauman (2000) acknowledges, choice has multiplied, and individual autonomy and agency has likewise expanded. The patterns and choices which once framed society and the individual, "are no longer 'given', let alone 'self-evident'; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another's commandments" (p. 7). Thus is it that more onus and accountability now appears to exist within the individual, as opposed to the structure of society, bringing with it escalating "burden of pattern-wearing and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individuals' shoulders" (Bauman, 2000, p.8). Therefore, it may be assumed that, as the bonds uniting society become more liquefied and fluid, the life experiences of an individual reflect this, becoming, in turn, more fluctuating, insecure, and uncertain.

Bauman's perspective aligns well with the intention of this present inquiry, as the journeying body moves and shifts in unique ways along the lifespan. As will be evident in the narratives of the women in chapter five, the journey of the body is one of fluctuation: the body does not remain in a place of complete disconnection nor full connection, but tends to shift across, between, and through these experiences in varying ways. A postmodern viewpoint such as Bauman's is hence appreciated in this study, as it understands and respects the

fluctuations of the journeying body, acknowledging and honouring its capacity and potentiality for transition and movement.

Such a postmodern perspective of fluctuations and shifts is elsewhere engaged in the literature in diverse fields. Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler (2000) apply this understanding in their exploration of the relationship between development and education, for example. These authors propose an alternative to the modernist perspective of development, suggesting that “Developmental ‘stages’ are not so much a matter of ‘natural unfoldings’ as they are necessary shifts in cognitive strategy that emerge from an accumulated weight of experience” (p. 128). They furthermore postulate that “The linear images associated with developmental stage theories are thus coming to be replaced with more flexible and fluid alternatives” (p. 129), and that what modernist theories would indicate as end points may actually just be adaptations and shifts to specific situations. In this perspective, echoing Baum’s focus on the fluidity of life experiences, development adopts a new non-linear pathway, moving, shifting, and evolving. Individuals are able to interpret their experiences with a higher level of knowledge, awareness, or understanding, rather than being rooted to pre-ordained stage of growth, and passively waiting for change to enter their lives (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000).

#### *Acceptance of multiple realities*

Another important element of the postmodern developmental approach reflects the postmodern honouring of multiple experiences, realities, and truths upon which this inquiry is grounded (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Morss, 1996; Sumara, Davis & Laidlaw, 2001). This expansive acceptance is evident in Sumara, Davis, & Laidlaw’s (2001) affirmation that, through the lens of postmodernism, “We live in a world of partial knowledge, local narratives, situated truths, and evolving identities” (p. 147), leading to an appreciation of flexible and multiple ways

of being and believing. Engaging this perspective thus permits the acceptance of all experiences and realities of transitions as valid and real.

Morss (1996) has encouraged the cultivation of such an encompassing perspective in his call for alternatives to the modernist model of thought. He has invited new conceptualizations of the developmental model, positing that innovative perspectives of development would free people from the restrictive compartmentalization of distinct, pre-ordained categories of growth and would thereby serve as an “emancipatory project” (p.1). Morss (1996) has questioned the foundation of modernist developmental theories which stipulate the regulated nature of change throughout an individual’s lifespan. In his recognition of multiple realities, Morss (1996) has proposed that “There is no such thing as ‘development’. If anything, development is a fiction or a set of fictions . . . . Development is a story, or rather a set of stories, each told by a different author with different interests” (p.152).

### *Meaning making*

The postmodern appreciation of multiple realities and truths is rooted in individual perception and meaning making, and further reinforces the notion of subjectivity (Bauman, 2000; Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000; Morss, 1996; Sumara, Davis & Laidlaw, 2001). Through a postmodern perspective, the time or circumstance of the development experience does not seem to matter, as it is the stories of individuals that are important, and the ways in which people make meanings of their unique journeys (Morss, 1996). Personal interpretations of experiences, and how individuals manage their new conflicts and challenges, are, therefore, essential. When an individual encounters the transition process, they are faced with new ways of thinking, being, and knowing. Parkes (1988) has affirmed that such experiences, termed psychosocial transitions, deeply impact an individual internally,

altering their expectations and assumptions of their previously-created schemas in order to accommodate the newly emerging “life space” (p. 53) and to make meaning of their unique experiences.

During a transitional period, an individual is invited to integrate emerging experiences, cognitions, and feelings that do not necessarily align with their “internal model of the world” (Parkes, 1988, p. 53), thus creating a new way of being in the world. Ronka, Oravala, and Pulkkinen (2003) thus identify life transitions as “the periods in life when tension increases, past decisions are re-evaluated and changes in lifestyle are considered” (p. 204). Transitions may necessitate a process of renegotiation: of life role, of identity, and of perspective, as previously discussed in this section (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; Bridges, 2003). One shared understanding of the transitional process, as articulated in the literature, seems to embrace the notion of letting go of the grasp of the past, and leaving space for the new to settle. As Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) note, “Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles” (p.30). This renegotiation process is thus conceptualized as a journey, which flows naturally and within its own time, and which invites an individual into a new experience of meaning making.

A developmental model that deeply honours the meaning-making potentiality of transitions is the narrative approach to development, which is of particular relevance to this present inquiry. Because of the use of narrative representation in this research, as will be further described in the third chapter, I have decided to briefly explore the nature of development through a narrative lens, which invites an expansive awareness of developmental transitions (McAdams, 2011; Rossiter, 1999a; Rossiter, 1999b). The narrative approach to development celebrates the stories that individuals create to add meaning to life experiences (Rossiter, 1999a).

It explores the transitional effects of developmental experiences instead of the nature and timing of the experiences themselves.

As Rossiter (1999a) has suggested, “a narrative understanding of adult development is grounded in the assumption that narrative is a primary structure through which human beings organize and make meaning of their experience” (p. 78). This approach “attempts to describe development from the inside as it is lived rather than from the outside as it is observed” (Rossiter, 1999a, p.78). Central to this approach is the expansion of insights and understandings, mirroring the tenets of hermeneutic inquiry that support this research. It is through storytelling – both the sharing of our own lived tales, as well as the listening of others’ experiences – that we are able to expand our own awareness and understanding to accommodate emerging knowledge, wisdom, and growth (Rossiter, 1999a).

Rossiter (1999b) has identified the value in exploring development through a narrative lens, sharing that “a narrative approach to development looks at the storied nature of development and considers story as metaphor for human life” (p. 57), rather than holding transitions and changes to any one particular truth. McAdams (2011) similarly describes the development of an individual’s identity through “the internalized and evolving story of the self that people begin to work on in the emerging adulthood years to provide their lives with some degree of unity or purpose” (p. 604). Such identity, McAdams (2011) suggests, emerges in order “to create a story for their lives that explains how they came to be who they are and where their lives may be going, while justifying their commitments to particular adult roles” (p.604).

This postmodern approach seeks personal interpretation, as individuals view their development through a constructivist lens in which they are the meaning makers of their own experiences (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Clegg & Slife, 2009). Time thus concedes to

meaning, and boundaries between phases disappear, as space emerges to welcome in unique interpretations of the lived experience. Narratives are an important means of capturing and creating such personal meaning; it is through stories that we develop an understanding of the vastness of our lives, and the growth of our selves along the journey, in interaction with the internal self and the external world, both of which are evolving and changing (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). Narratives embrace history and culture, and showcase the inter-relatedness of individual transitions in the grand scope of a life story (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Rossiter, 1999a; Rossiter, 1999b). The narrative developmental approach certainly reflects the intention of my study, and respects the shifting body narratives shared therein.

#### *Relational connectivity*

Thus far in my exploration of the construct of transition, I have discussed several integral postmodern understandings on the experience of such, in the context of the developmental transitions that may occur throughout the lifespan. These understandings have been articulated as fluid, unique, and ripe with the potential for identity creation/re-creation and individualized meaning making. The final postmodern understanding of transitions that is important for this research invites a focus on women, and in particular, the relational experiences of women, and the unfolding of their transitions within the parameters of their intersecting relational life spheres. It is central to this inquiry to voice the postmodern perspective of the development of women to more clearly honour the experiences of the participants in this study, all of whom have self-identified as female.

In so doing, the gender binary returns to awareness. I feel that it is important at this time to make explicit once again my appreciation of all gender identities and experiences. I would also like to emphasize my perception that a focus on gender is relevant at this point in the inquiry

in order to highlight the differences that exist within popular theories of development, which are largely gendered in nature, and equally to celebrate the progress of certain feminist scholars, as will now be showcased.

Female-centric perspectives that embody and honour the fullness of women's experiences are clearly essential in the understanding of their development; yet the field of development itself has primarily been rooted within a male-oriented perspective, as has much of the field of psychology in general (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Before the emergence of postmodern female-focused theories of development by various feminist scholars, the experiences of women were not highlighted as being any different from those of men: women were rarely brought into focus at all, other than by those who may have wondered why they did not seem to fit into the widely-engaged modernist developmental models (Gilligan, 1982).

Human development was considered to be a relatively static and structured process for everybody, regardless of gender, and women were thus unable to locate themselves within the popular theories of development (Miller, 1991). The field of development consequently offered a limited and narrow perspective of life transitions and changes that not only made absent the lived experiences of women, but furthermore weakened the totality of the field in general (Gilligan, 1982). According to Surrey (1991), such a disregard for the unique and integrated experiences of women has prevented an encompassing conceptualization of the experience of development. As she has asserted, it is "only through describing women's experiences can we begin to map out a theory of full human development" (Surrey, 1991, p.35).

The absence of awareness and honouring of the complex and unique lived experiences of women is postulated to have profoundly impacted women and the formation and cultivation of



their identities (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). For this reason, Miller (1991) has argued that “The model of self-development as it has been defined so far does not help us to understand or to help women well” (p.24). Indeed, as Gilligan (1982) has posited, “Developmental theorists . . . project a masculine image, and one that appears frightening to women” (p.6). Being largely invisible and unrecognized within the modernist theories of development, women may have felt inadequate or uncertain about their own experiences, without guidance or support to help facilitate and understand the changes and transitions that they were facing. Surrey (1991) has suggested that “Women, using male models (of development) begin to define themselves as lacking something critical – whether it be a penis or a firm ‘separate’ sense of self” (p. 36), thus taking away from the fullness of their own personal experiences. If we seek to examine and celebrate the lived experiences of women, it is hence necessary to extend beyond the containment of their development and transitions in modernist stages, and to give presence and attention to their dynamic, evolving, and unique experiences, such as this inquiry intends to do.

The literature in the field of postmodern development now attends to and appreciates the unique realities of women, inviting a rich and meaningful exploration of their experiences. It depicts the expansive experiences of women in all of their selves, roles, and identities. Deeply supported within the literature is the perspective of women as relational beings for whom relational embeddedness plays a significant role in their own personal development. Postmodern scholars appear to agree that the development of women takes place within the parameters of her relationships with other people, as women create themselves through the intersecting contexts in which they are located (Chodorow, 1974; Covington & Surrey, 1997; Covington, 2007; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Surrey & Kaplan, 1991; Josselson, 1987; Kaplan, Gleason & Klein, 1991; Liang,

Tracy, Taylor, Williams, Jordan, & Miller, 2002; Miller, 1986; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). As Surrey (1991) has proposed, “our conception of the self-in-relation involves the recognition that, for women, the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships” (p. 52).

A discussion of the developmental experiences of women, particularly as they navigate transitions in their life journeys, thus necessitates an awareness of their relational connectivity with the people who colour the pages of their stories, and an exploration of how such interactions impact their own identity formation and lived experiences. Hence the significance of a postmodern, female-centered perspective in the exploration of the journeying bodies of women, which honours and celebrates the multi-layered and deeply nuanced connections that energize and shape their dis/embodied experiences.

An examination of the notion of relational connectivity, and its impact on development, may be facilitated by an exploration of the development of an individual from the earliest stages of life (Bylington, 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Covington, 2007; Miller, 1991; Orbach, 2003; Surrey, 1991). In her exploration of the development of the self, Miller (1991) has stated that an “internal image of oneself” (p.14) is created as a product of infants’ early relationships, outside of the scope of gender. Her insight aligns with that of Orbach (2003), as highlighted previously, who similarly encourages the perspective that body identity and awareness are shaped and facilitated within and through relationships with others, evident in her declaration that the body “doesn’t exist in any viable way outside of relationship” (p. 11).

The early experiences of individuals are also depicted in the literature through a distinctly gendered lens, particularly in the context of the proposed interpersonal connection and disconnection capacities of the binary genders (Bylington, 1997; Chodorow, 1974; Covington,

2007; Gilligan, 1982; Kaplan, Gleason & Klein, 1991). I believe that such an examination invites enhanced acknowledgement of the unique and expansive developmental experiences of women, giving further support to the importance of postmodern developmental frameworks such as the ones proposed in this section.

Certain scholars suggest that females and males may actually begin their lives already engaged in relationships and negotiations of different natures and complexities, which may thereafter impact their own identity formation and way of being in and relating to the world. In her exploration of the relational experiences of women, Covington (2007) identifies a potential division between the ways in which males and females form attachments. She purports that, although connection is seemingly a “basic human need” (Covington, 2007, p.4), it would appear that “females are more attuned to connection while males are more attuned to differentiation” (Covington, 2007, p.4). Gilligan (1982) has voiced a similar understanding that males may be largely focused on separation and individuation - grounded in early experiences of differentiation from their primary caregiver: presumably, the mother figure – while females may be more concerned with attachment to their primary caregiver, to whom they presumably may more so relate.

Kaplan, Gleason & Klein (1991) have likewise indicated that females are seemingly encouraged to develop a “core relational self” by their earliest caregivers, while males are largely discouraged from doing the same. Subsequently, these authors have shared, “for women the sense of self is refined, enhanced, and strengthened not through a series of separations but through the inner experiences of relationships marked by mutuality and affective connection” (p. 123). Byington (1997) may agree with this perspective, as she has proposed that “women’s

psychological growth and development occur through adding to rather than separating from relationships. Consequently, defining themselves as similar to others through relationships is fundamental to women's identities" (p.35). Each of these perspectives, while binary in nature, help provide an understanding of the proposed innate relationality of women.

Through such perspectives, relationship is conceptualized as central to the development of women, shaping and forming identity and sense of self. Relational connectivity thus becomes a primary grounding place from which women's lived experiences may unfold. These interactional understandings of development exist in contrast to the modern developmental theories as proposed by Levinson and Erikson, which have focused on individuation and isolation of the self (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Dunkel & Sefcek, 2009; Gilligan, 1982).

Therefore, while Erikson's model of development has suggested that identity formation may precede intimacy in relationships, the opposite is presented through the postmodern female-centered developmental lens. Identity and intimacy thus become co-occurring and reciprocal experiences, such as they both take place in the context of interpersonal interaction (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Postmodern feminist scholars have affirmed that there is, for women, no isolated development of the self: there is simply the development of the self in relation to others (Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). The self-in-relationship-to-the-self thus seemingly develops in interaction with the self-in-relationship-to-others. Miller (1991) has affirmed that interactional development thereby "means that the beginnings of the concept of self are not those of a static and lone self being ministered to by another (incidentally, this construct has a strong male flavour), but rather of a self inseparable from dynamic interaction" (p.14).

It is this empowering postmodern perspective of development that informs this current research. An exploration of the evolving body narratives of women would not be complete without contemplation of their relational connectivity with others, and an honouring of the growth, transition, and identity formation that takes place within and between each of their intersecting relational spheres. To represent the women in this study is to celebrate who they are as dynamic and complex individuals, and to recognize the interrelationships that they have with the characters who appear in their narratives. To not acknowledge such relationships, and who they are being within the context of these relationships, is to omit certain essential elements of who they are as individuals, sisters, daughters, mother, aunts, lovers, friends, and women. It is thus that I have chosen to highlight and honour the relational nature of women in respect and relation to their bodily experiences.

To conclude this section on development, I engage the following words of Gilligan (1982), who has captured the importance of highlighting women's developmental experiences:

The elusive mystery of women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing of attachment in the human life cycle. Woman's place in man's life cycle is to protect this recognition while the developmental litany intones the celebration of separation, autonomy, individuation, and natural rights. (p. 23).

## Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter centers on the particulars of the inquiry process, presenting the steps that I have taken along this research path. Having already discussed the “why” grounding my study, I now focus on the “how”, firstly by demonstrating the appropriateness of qualitative inquiry for such an exploration, and identifying the methodological approaches that form the framework of this research. In addition, I will outline the methods engaged to select participants for the study, as well as the strategies utilized to collect the data. This chapter will describe my role as a reflexive researcher in this process; it will also discuss the ethical nature of my study, with a particular awareness on my dual identity as a researcher and friend to several of the participants. Thereafter this chapter will conclude with an introduction to the narratives of the journeying body, which will be shared and explored later in this thesis.

### Qualitative Research

My research is located within a qualitative framework. As Smith (2008) proposes, this genre of research is “generally engaged with exploring, describing, and interpreting the personal and social experiences of participants” (p. 2). Qualitative research, Luttrell (2010) describes, “insists upon a face-to-face, heart felt encounter between knowing subjects, (and) a recognition that each of us is unique in our effort to make sense of ourselves and the world around us” (p. 1). I feel that qualitative inquiry is well-suited to the nature of this present research, as it is the experiences of the journeying body in its movements from, through, across, and between disconnection and connection that I seek to explore, as set forth in an intimate, curious dialogue with women who have lived such an experience.

### *Subjective nature of reality*

Four elements of qualitative research inform my current study, the first of which concerns the subjective, interpretive nature of reality. Qualitative inquiry proposes the postmodern understanding of reality as a socially-constructed entity (Sumara, Davis, & Laidlaw, 2001). Furthermore, since individuals actively construct their own sense of the world, a qualitative framework equally holds the postmodern understanding that multiple interpretations of situations and processes may exist (Boeije, 2010). Honouring this subjectivity, qualitative inquiry is rooted in an appreciation of the participants as the interpreters of their own experiences, and an awareness of the intermingling of meanings from researcher and participants alike. It encourages a relational approach, wherein the perspectives and insights of each member of the process are important (Wiesenfeld, 2000).

It is this same honouring that forms the foundation of my research. I recognize that each of the women in this study are experts in their own bodily experiences; this recognition is a position that I have consistently sought to respect throughout this research journey. I align myself with the idea that, in creating an understanding of our personal reality, we derive meaning from our interpretations of our experiences, and that no two interpretations of a process or experience may be precisely alike. This understanding correlates well with the notion of positioning as identified in the previous chapter. I honour the differing perspectives and points of view offered by the women as they reflect upon and share their bodily journeys, trusting that they are the experts of their own bodies and experiences.

This was, in fact, one of the most beautiful and powerful aspects of my research journey: bearing witness to the interpretations and understandings that the participants cultivated in relation to their bodily experiences. I appreciated seeing them process their

experiences and develop for themselves an understanding of what is meant by the three key terms highlighted in this study – disconnection, connection, and transition – and engaging them to understand these terms in the framework of their own body’s experiences. In inviting the women to share their stories, I helped facilitate the conceptualization of their own meanings of their journeying body’s experiences. Each of the women shared with me that the interview process was the first time in which they had contemplated their own stories with such intimacy and awareness, and with such a celebratory, curious stance. They had essentially lived their body’s experiences without viewing their journeys collectively or across time, and, for the most part, without expressing any sort of appreciation or gratitude to themselves for the challenging experiences that they have faced living within their body. Most of the women thanked me for providing them the space and encouragement to frame their experiences in this honouring and empowering light.

In my exploration of the transitions that women experience as they journey from a space of bodily disconnection to connection, I identify the dynamic and individualistic nature of the process, which may look and feel quite differently to the women who have lived it. The transition may be processed, interpreted, and described in diverse ways both across the women and within the women themselves, depending on their context and life experiences. As will be discussed later in this chapter, I entered into this research with my own deeply-rooted prior understandings and assumptions, based on the experiences of my own journeying body: things that I felt implicitly within my body without having any sort of academic container in which to place them. Such an examination of pre-understandings is consistent with the nature of the hermeneutic framework which informs my study.



I also entered this inquiry respecting the subjective nature of experiences, and realizing that the interpretations that I would hear in the interviews might not align with my own, or might, in fact, facilitate a new way of conceptualizing the desired concepts that I had previously not contemplated. Being open and respectful of all bodily journeys, I was acutely aware that both my reality and understanding of the experiences of disconnection, connection, and transition are born from my own subjectivity, and that the understandings and meanings that the women create of their own experiences could potentially offer a fresh perspective different from my own. I trusted the women to guide the dialogue in the way that they chose, and to make personal meaning out of their experiences, however they chose to do so, as the interviews unfolded. The interview questions (Appendix A) were framed in such a way as to elicit personal perspectives, and to take the exploration of their bodily experiences to a level of contemplation and reflection, thereby inviting the women into a space in which they could create subjective meaning from their own lived experiences. I align with qualitative researchers in the understanding that subjectivity exists within the context of an individual's social and cultural experiences and frameworks, as well as the understanding that meaning making is an ongoing, evolving, dynamic, relativistic, and unique process (Krauss, 2005), and such a position I have strived to honour in this research.

#### *Richness of data*

The second element of qualitative research that informs my exploration concerns the expansiveness of the data. The data emerging from my study is rich and multi-layered, owing to the engaging, descriptive narratives that the women have so candidly and generously shared. In this study, I sought and gathered expansive data to explore this multi-faceted topic via rich, lengthy data gained from individual interviews with six participants, as well as the inclusion of

my own bodily story. I felt that interviews with six women of varying backgrounds and ages would provide me with a cross-sectional understanding of the processes that I sought to explore. The interview questions were constructed in such a way as to invite the women into a gentle yet nuanced exploration of the experiences of their own journeying body, through a lens of appreciation and respect.

The women that participated in the interviews were each eager to tell their story – as indicated by the interest that they initially expressed when learning of this research study, in addition to the timely manner in which they signed on to participate – and they each openly relayed the story of their journeying body with attention, insight, and reflection. Their openness to sharing their narratives in detail expanded the data from which I was able to draw, providing me with a wealth of stories and experiences, and thereby added enormously to my developing and evolving understanding of the movements of the journeying body. The richness of data enabled me to build new meanings and fuse previously-held assumptions with burgeoning conceptualizations of the dynamic processes of disconnection, connection, and transition. In speaking of the qualitative approach, O’Toole (2010) proposes that such an abundance of data is essential in this genre of inquiry as it is focused on “building descriptions, explanations and theories that are rich, nuanced, and comprehensive” (p. 121), three adjectives which describe well the journeys that the women in this study have shared with me.

### *Voice*

This richness of data is conveyed through the third element of qualitative inquiry that informs my research: voice. It is through the medium of voice that the data emerges, shaping and contextualizing the narratives, and providing meaning beyond the spoken and/or transcribed words. The notion of voice, and its multi-layered, post-structural nature, is depicted in the

literature as being a deeply nuanced element of uncertainty and fluidity, comprised of more than what words may express (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). Its complex nature may make it rather challenging to identify voice and to understand both what it simultaneously communicates and does not say. It can also be challenging to identify whose voice is being expressed, and which voices are being silenced and/or left on the periphery of the dialogue. Mazzei and Jackson (2012) discuss the privileging of the voice that occurs in qualitative inquiry, and wonder exactly whose voice tends to be engaged in the exploration of data. This questioning has aided me in my own understanding of the various voices that I have chosen to represent in my exploration of the dynamic experiences of the journeying body, and, thus, the ways in which I have chosen to transmit the rich data to the readers.

In my desire to better understand the notion of voice as it relates to my study, I utilize this helpful description provided by Mazzei (2009), as she ponders the presence of voice in qualitative inquiry:

*Voice happens. But when does voice happen? I am no longer certain that I can know when voice happens, because it is always happening. What I do know is that the voice I have been seeking as an indicator of expressed thought exceeds my ways of hearing, knowing, and understanding. The voice which I have been seeking to ‘capture’ and tame as clear, pure, and articulable is now only present to me as slippery, shifting, knowable, unknowable, certain, uncertain, audible, inaudible, and certainly unstable. (p.45).*

Mazzei (2009) furthermore illustrates voice as emerging from what is said and what is left unsaid: the “elusive voice with its promise of unspoken meanings” (p.45).

This fluid understanding of the shifting nature of voice aligns well with the intentions of this study, as I have sought to respect the voices of the women throughout the writing of their

narratives, the construction of which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. The voices that I have invited to the study have been voices of vulnerability and uncertainty, coupled with the powerful voices of courage and self-exploration. I feel that the narratives of the journeying body communicate the depth of the experiences shared, and the accompanying emotions that may be integrated within. I also feel that the narratives shine an honouring light on the stories that were told in trust to me. In my writing of the narratives, I have been mindful of engaging the women's words as much as possible, in utilizing direct quotations and expressions. I have also ensured at several points during the writing process that the women were satisfied with the narratives, and approved of their content, by allowing them to read their own stories and to alter any details or experiences as they so desired. An ethical and empathic awareness thus coloured my interactions with the women in the context of their sacred stories, which adds to my belief that their voices were acknowledged, appreciated, supported, and engaged.

However, in mindfully respecting and representing their voices, the implicit knowledge exists within me that, while composing their narratives, I have privileged my voice as a researcher while endeavouring to showcase fairly their own. That is, I have used my own words to discuss the experiences of the women, and to create my own meaning from their journeys, even if it is their words and ideas that I am conveying. I have elected to write the narratives of the journeying body in the third-person perspective – not so much out of conscious choice, but more so out of a natural comfortability -- while I have written my own narrative from a first-person perspective – which was, again, a natural process for me and not so much of a conscious decision.

With the intention to respect fully the words of the women, the narratives engage direct quotations that express the simultaneous power and tumultuousness of their journeys. Yet I am

aware that the words that are presented are the ones that I have selected to best suit the direction and purposes of the research. Of equal awareness is the idea that, in the transcription process of the research, I have potentially missed or minimized certain elements of their journey that the participants would perhaps deem important in their life narratives; alternatively, perhaps I have over-emphasized certain experiences that, to them, do not hold as much power or significance. This is the dualistic nature of voice: the understanding that what is expressed verbally – or not communicated at all – is one aspect, and what is interpreted or expressed in another medium may be entirely different. Awareness of the divergent nature of voice is thus an important element in this inquiry. Amidst the uncertainty and fluidity inherent in voice, I have learned that the qualitative approach is a flexible container which permits its shifts and flow, and I agree with Davison's (2008) perspective that "Subjectivity of voice in qualitative research is not only recognized and acknowledged, but celebrated" (p. 28). It is this that I have intended to do in the writing of the women's narratives.

### *Uncertainty*

The awareness and celebration of voice flows into the fourth element of qualitative inquiry which frames this research: the uncertainty of emerging data. In respecting and showcasing participants' unique voices and subjective interpretations, the qualitative approach is rooted in a place of unknowingness and openness to curiosity, as the researcher provides the space for the unfolding of whatever may arise (Binding & Tapp, 2008). It is not easy to ascertain the experiences or interpretations which may emerge from a story being recounted by someone else's voice (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001), especially a story that was previously unspoken. A researcher must thus be comfortable with flexibility and able to relinquish a certain degree of control of the interview situation.

To be comfortable holding this unknowing stance, it is essential that a researcher identify their own prior assumptions, as hermeneutics encourages (Chang, 2010), and that they also recognize the subjective nature of the research (Krauss, 2005), as well as the multiple meanings and voices that may be shared (Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). It is thus integral for a researcher to locate themselves within the inquiry, to know and comprehend their own positioning – from where their understandings and assumptions arise – and to be able to temporarily hold these ideas at bay, without releasing them outright, to allow an opening for the cultivation of new perceptions and ideas.

This sense of unknowingness and uncertainty was present within my research, as the descriptions and meanings of the experiences shared by the women were richly textured and locally situated. A topic of this intimate nature must ideally be shared in a space that welcomes uncertainty and unknowingness, as the experiences shared are so personally rooted. In the context of our interviews, I needed to be open to uncertainty and able to shift in multiple directions, as I could not be certain of knowing exactly what meanings or understandings would arise through the disclosure of the women's bodily stories. I essentially handed the power over to the women, and while steering the dialogue in some ways through the asking of several semi-structured questions, I was largely at the whim of the women's choices as to how much they wanted to share, and how far they chose to take the conversation, thus inviting data that came from the heart and carried with it much texture and meaning.

Therefore, while I had my own personal understandings of the experiences of disconnection, connection, and transition – and had contemplated such for myself prior to the interviews -- I was very receptive to the perspectives of the women, and curious to envision the new insights that could potentially emerge from their stories. I, therefore, agree with the

understanding that, because of its expansive reach, qualitative inquiry does not seek any one idea or theme in particular, but rather welcomes the unique conceptualizations that are unpacked as individuals share their lived experiences and derive meaning from their personal processes (Krauss, 2005). The data that emerges from this approach may take many shapes and forms, each one respectful of the individual's voice and journey. It is within this place of openness that my research is located, coupled with a sense of uncertainty, curiosity and anticipation for the stories told and the voices heard, as the stories of the journeying body are brought to light.

### Hermeneutic Inquiry

My research centres on the sharing of lived experiences of the journeying body, and the meanings at which women arrive in exploring their own individual process of movement from disconnection to connection with their body. A hermeneutic lens invites an exploration of the interpretations that individuals place upon life experiences (Lane, 2005), and, therefore, provides an appropriate structure for this study. I have chosen to engage this framework as it supports a further understanding and practice of the qualitative principles discussed in the previous section, including subjectivity, expansiveness of data, awareness and appreciation of voice, uncertainty and curiosity, and engagement of prior assumptions and understandings (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Krauss, 2005; Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009; Mazzei & Jackson, 2012). It is also concerned with meaning making as a dialogic process, one that occurs via dialogue between the researcher and the participants, and between the researcher and interview texts (Chang, 2010).

As a research framework, hermeneutics is a broad field of inquiry; this current research is particularly informed by the philosophical hermeneutic approach of Gadamer because of its fit with the study, as will now be explained. In particular, six of Gadamer's insights inform this study, including the elements of curiosity, genuine conversation, pre-understandings, fusion of

horizons, hermeneutic circle, and transformation (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Gadamer, 1976; Gadamer, 1989; McCall, 2011).

### *Curiosity*

The first element of the Gadamerian hermeneutic approach as present in my own research is that of curiosity. McCall (2011) discusses Gadamer's understanding of curiosity as an integral element of hermeneutic inquiry, sharing that "curiosity designates an openness to novelty, an openness that helps us to evaluate our prejudices" (p. 189). Through hermeneutic research, Gadamer (1976) posits that "We welcome just that guest who promises something new to our curiosity" (p.9), someone who offers something to us that may be differentiated from, and yet supplementary to, our own prejudices or pre-understandings.

McCall (2011) identifies hermeneutic curiosity as a space in which we invite a foreign body such that it may encourage us to become aware of our own separateness from it. While I do not perceive the stories of the women to be foreign, nor do I believe their journeys to be separate from my own, I do appreciate McCall's suggestion of becoming aware of one's distance from what is being examined, which leads naturally into the understanding of locating oneself prior to the research. While I feel that we are all deeply connected bodily and energetically, and that our stories share unified themes, so too do I understand that a certain distancing had to take place in my study to enable a space for the growth of new ways of perceiving and understanding the processes to be explored. I could not have been firmly attached to my beliefs whilst being fully open to their own; a release of my grasp on my own pre-assumptions and ideas had to occur, in order to open a space for potential new growths of understanding which would facilitate a deepening of my own perspective. Thus I believe strongly in the notion of openness to uncertainty, one of the pillars of qualitative inquiry as discussed in the previous section, and



believe that the intermingling of curiosity and uncertainty emphasizes a powerful relationship between the hermeneutic and qualitative approaches framing this study.

The space of curiosity cultivated in this study was thus ripe for fresh insights into the experiences of the journeying body. My research is grounded firmly in this space of openness and desire to deepen my understanding of the body's shifts, as this thesis has already shown. As shared in the introductory chapter, the topic of my research is not simply a topic that was randomly chosen, or one that was given to me: it was born of my own intense desire and motivation to understand the shifting experiences of my body, and my body in relation to other bodies in the world. I was undoubtedly, as Moules, Field, McCaffrey & Laing (2014) describe, "addressed personally" (p.1) to begin this exploration, beckoned to the task by a longing and hunger that has swirled within me for many years, and that was waiting for a suitable vessel through which to come to life. The connection that I felt with this topic parallels Moules et al's (2014) description of the pull that a researcher feels towards her subject, the energy that brings her towards her topic. While it took me quite some time to locate this topic – knowing the field in which I wanted to concentrate, but not the medium or approach -- once the defined plan entered my brain space, I was immediately pulled forward by something bigger and more insistent that I could perceive.

I was, thus, summoned to the task of the research. Moules et al (2014) describe the beginning of an inquiry as an address, or a "feeling of being caught in some aspect of the world's regard, of being called or summoned" (p.1). It is through this process of being addressed that a researcher pauses to listen to the beckoning, and is so captured by it that they open a space for curiosity to emerge and new understanding to grow. It is here that we do the following, as Moules et al (2014) postulate:

We are hailed by subject matter, or better perhaps a *subject that matters* so that, when we are addressed, we are obligated to respond. . . to the best of our abilities, to do the right thing, in the right way, as Gadamer would say. (p. 2).

As researchers answering the call of the pull, we do not seek to change or destroy the subject matter, but merely to observe, interpret, and understand it, and to allow it to continue to live in the world undisturbed (Moules et al, 2014).

That this topic is a subject that matters to me is of no question; it was the *only* subject that mattered to me, on such an intimate level, when I began the process of contemplating my potential research. As it was, I began this inquiry with an openness and inquisitiveness to expand my understanding of the journeying body, and to step outside of my own prior assumptions and beliefs in order to welcome new meanings and perspectives from women who have also lived the experience. Entering a study such as this, as personally rooted as it was, requires a mixture of attributes: curiosity, intrigue, courage, trepidation, playfulness, flexibility, introspection, openness, vulnerability, and willingness to expand/grow/change. It was thus a multi-faceted experience which offered both gifts and challenges.

I find solace in Moules et al's (2014) depiction of being addressed to a topic as being "a breathtaking and breath-sustaining gift" (p.2). These authors discuss the mysterious nature of a topic, which requires one "to approach it carefully, with both curiosity and suspicion, suspense, and intent, discipline and free play" (Moules et al, 2014, p.2). Thus, being called to research a topic requires a willingness to be and to welcome everything, and to be open to the experience of not knowing. This enables a researcher to engage in authentic dialogue with the participants, and to have their understanding and knowledge shifted in potentially unexpected ways (Moules, Field, McCaffrey, & Laing, 2014), as happened with me in this current inquiry.

Cultivating this space of curiosity provides the possibility for the development of a genuine conversation, which is another important element of Gadamerian hermeneutic inquiry. Gadamer (1972; 1989) has helped us understand how a genuine conversation looks and feel, and why it is essential in the creation of meaning of an experience. He has proposed that a genuine conversation is a necessary element in the formation and expression of understanding of experiences (Gadamer, 1976, 1989); its importance is further emphasized in his affirmation that “to become always capable of conversation – that is, to listen to the Other – appears to me to be the true attainment of humanity” (Gadamer, 1972, p. 358). Wiercinski (2011) furthermore identifies that “What is happening in a conversation while facing the other is a *relocation* of the self . . . the self is facing the other and is faced with the other . . . thus, conversation is a powerful exercise in learning to re-position oneself” (p. 43), adding to the transformative quality of hermeneutic inquiry, which will soon be discussed.

Binding and Tapp (2008) likewise describe the genuine conversation as a foundational element in the emergence of understanding between individuals, as expressed through open dialogue that flows unhindered. As they identify, “When Gadamer spoke of the genuine conversation, he was speaking of a fundamental way of being with another” (Binding & Tapp, 2008, p. 124). These authors share the following:

The word genuine also bears closer examination, coming from the Latin word *ingenuus*, meaning native, free-born, authentic, real, true, not counterfeit, unadulterated. Thus, there is a quality of authenticity, unaffectedness, and sincerity which is brought to this discussion of the genuine conversation explored through the lens of Gadamer’s understanding. (Binding & Tapp, 2008, p. 124).

Beginning from a space of curiosity, I thus entered into informal dialogue with the women, harbouring great respect for their experiences, and trusting in their ability to direct the flow of the interview process in a genuine, authentic manner consistent with hermeneutic inquiry so that meanings could be personally created. I was genuinely interested in their own ideas about the topics proposed to them, and listened to them, grounded in my own pre-understandings, and yet open and curious as to what understandings would emerge from our dialogue.

### *Genuine conversation*

There are several specific ways in which the genuine conversation figures prominently in my research. Sincerity and openness were important in all stages of the research, most particularly in the context of the interviews, in which I engaged with the women in authentic dialogue to explore their bodily experiences. I will further examine the transformational role of language in the interview process later in this chapter. The interview environment itself was one key facet needed to support authentic dialogue. The interviews all took place within a space that the women deemed to be safe for and respectful toward them, physically and metaphorically. As I am familiar with these women in various capacities outside of the research context, I feel like our prior connection helped foster the comfort and safety that we felt with one another, and aided in engaging in conversation that was open and free-flowing, supporting the development of authentic dialogue. My relationship with the women, and the ways in which our familiarity may have impacted the study, will also be explored later in this chapter.

How the topic was invited was another central facet of creating authentic dialogue. The questions were semi-structured prompts; as such, the questions invited reflection and openings for exploration, as opposed to structured questions seeking to direct the conversation. Each of the interviews flowed in unique ways, dependant on the desires of the individual women. The

conversations with the women flowed naturally; they were not contrived or forced. The easygoing nature of the interviews were evident in the relaxed body language of the women, the ways in which they expressed themselves openly and with smiles, the meaningful eye contact that we shared, the silence that we allowed, as well as the friendly manner with which the women offered me tea, snacks, and other refreshments at various points throughout the interviews.

Attending to how the women received the process is another crucial facet of assessing genuine dialogue. Although several of the women expressed hesitation in beginning the interview, admitting to have never quite thought about their experiences in such a context and not being totally certain how to begin, I observed that none of the women showed any degree of nervousness or uneasiness, and any hesitation quickly disappeared once the questions began. Our interviews thus began in a calming manner, and proceeded on in this way. Each of the conversations ultimately seemed to be a source of gratitude and reflection for the participants, as indicated via their words, body language, and expressions. Appreciation was expressed by several of the women for having taken part in such an endeavour, as they directly thanked me for having proposed such a topic in the first place, as well as for having interviewed them, and they expressed a vested interest in reading this research once completed. All in all, each of the interview processes flowed smoothly and comfortably.

The genuine conversation, inspired by curiosity, is evidently an essential element of my study. An important component of the genuine conversation as reflected in my work involves the welcoming of the uncertain, and the subsequent balance of power that arises between researcher and participant, as neither individual in the conversation knows exactly where the dialogue will lead. Gadamer (1989) has discussed the uncertain nature of the genuine conversation, suggesting

the following:

The more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather it is more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 383).

We do this instead of knowing how the conversation will unfold or in which direction it may flow. It is from this position of uncertainty, Binding and Tapp (2008) posit, that the space opens for questioning and exploring, which may lead to a deepening of understanding and interpretation. This stance of unknowingness, Gadamer (1989) has recognized, equalizes the power between individuals in dialogue, as “the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it (the genuine conversation) than the led” (p. 383).

As previously discussed in the context of qualitative inquiry, my research is rooted in an open space of welcoming and uncertainty, which invites the encouragement and appreciation of any stories and understandings that may emerge in dialogue with the women in my study. Although I was familiar with all of the participants in varying capacities, as will be further discussed later in this chapter, I did not know significant amounts of their bodily narratives. From conversations held prior to this research, I knew that one woman, Holly, had experiences of disordered eating behaviour in her adolescence/young adulthood. However, I did not know the extent of her experiences, or any of the stories that she later recounted. In addition, while I vaguely knew various parts of Bonnie’s life story, through prior conversations, I had not heard the experiences that she shared in the intimate telling of her body’s narrative. Similarly, while I was aware that Sarah had had breast cancer, we had never discussed the particularities of her situation in any detail prior to our interview. As for the other three women, I entered the

interviews in a space of total uncertainty, not knowing where their narratives would lead, but trusting that, as they had expressed interest in participating in the process, they had body-related narratives of disconnection and connection to share.

Within the contexts of the interviews themselves, there was also evidence of uncertainty, as the women each took their time answering the questions, asking for clarifications when necessary, and navigating their way through a conversation that asked them to speak of a topic that they had previously never discussed in such detail. Each of the woman expressed that this was their first time conceptualizing their experiences in such a manner, and that they had never thought of their experiences in such totality before; thus, uncertainty was equally an implicit part of the interview process with them as it was with me.

The emphasis on the genuine conversation from Gadamer's perspective equally brings to light the power of language in hermeneutic inquiry. Gadamer has highlighted the integral nature of language in understanding (Regan, 2012; Wiercinski, 2011). He, as Regan (2012) acknowledges, "identifies language acting as the medium for understanding and a means of sharing the complexities of human experience" (p.286). Other theorists echo this notion, including Chang (2010), who states that "Language is the means by which particular understandings are negotiated and developed" (p.21). For such expression and development of meaning between individuals, it is imperative that the people engaging in genuine conversation have a shared language, one that belongs to neither of them exclusively, but to the collectivity of both in the context of their authentic dialogue. The genuine conversation takes place through the medium of spoken language, and yet it is also important for the shared language to be one that can be understood privately outside of the conversation as well.

This shared language Gadamer has referred to as “logos”, which Regan (2012) explains is the “vehicle for communicating with others” (p. 288). It is essentially the means in which the verbal expression of a word may provoke a particular thought or image, thus bringing the individuals closer together in their shared understanding of an experience. Regan (2012) furthermore proposes that “when thinking of any object we unconsciously join up our internalised thoughts within the shared, externalised medium of communicating with other people” (p. 288), thus creating a language with “shared acceptance of meaning” (Regan, 2012, p. 288).

In respect to this study, I was very mindful of the language that was being engaged both within the context of the interviews as well as in the writing of the narratives. The research questions were compiled very mindfully, with the women in mind, such that I was utilizing words that they would likely be able to understand easily. I did not want the language of the interviews to be a barrier in any way, or to cause any sort of conflict or discomfort with the women, which would potentially distract them from engaging in a fully authentic dialogue. Thus, the questions were composed simply and attentively, and it was essential to me that I was able to explain the questions in further detail if questioned by the women. I made certain to have formulated my own understanding of the concepts of disconnection, connection, and transition, so that I would be comfortable explaining these in simple terms to the women if they required clarification.

Upon commencing the interview process, I had already completed most of the literature review, which allowed me to approach the interviews with an already-contextualized understanding of the key terms as described in the literature. Additionally, I was clear with the women that they were able to create their own definitions or understandings of such terms and



experiences, which all of them did, even though a few of the women did ask for my own personal definition as well. All in all, I feel that we collectively had a shared language which enabled us to approach the topic with mutual understanding and appreciation.

In addition, the language that I utilized in the writing of the women's narratives was in alignment with the shared language of the interviews. When creating the narratives, I was mindful of adding direct quotations from the women whenever possible, so that, even though my own voice may have been privileged in telling the stories, it was the words of the women that were being portrayed. I confirmed with all of the women that they were in agreement with the language that I did use, and they were free at any point in the study to alter any language, including their own names, as they chose. As it was, only one of the woman requested any sort of change – the use of a pseudonym rather than her real name -- leaving me to believe that the language that I engaged in their narratives did indeed come from the shared language that we had cultivated in our interviews. In regard to the woman who requested the use of a different first name in the creating of her narrative, a pseudonym was mutually decided upon between the two of us, and she was in agreement with how the rest of her narrative was relayed. I will discuss the use of names in a further segment.

#### *Pre-understandings*

Becoming aware of one's own situatedness or pre-understandings brought to the research is equally important. The awareness of prior knowledge and location of thought is a crucial element in hermeneutic inquiry. Gadamer (1989) has suggested that it is impossible for a researcher to present neutrality, and that it is central for the researcher to name and claim their pre-understandings, as an essential and dynamic facet of the ongoing research process. In speaking of the pre-understandings with which a researcher engages with texts, Gadamer (1989)

has professed that:

This kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one’s self, but the conscious assimilation of one’s own bias, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus able to assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings. (Gadamer, 1989, p.239).

Gadamer (1989) has posited that individuals carry years of experiences, relations, and learnings, and that such prior ways of thinking, being, and knowing, are not to be set aside or avoided but instead owned, engaged and valued.

Because of the power and nature of my own bodily narrative, it was essential that I choose an epistemological lens that engaged my bodily pre-understandings and worked with my assumptions in a dynamic, thoughtful, and useful manner that supported my dialogic meaning-making with my participants, during the interviews and the reading of their transcribed texts. Thus, hermeneutics actively encouraged me to engage what I already know, understand, and feel about my topic, rather than entering into research as a blank slate. My own prior connections to my topic were used to inform and strengthen my current study, as it provides a solid foundation upon which to build new understandings.

To this study, I brought a significant amount of self-awareness and tacit knowing of the journeying body, as rooted in my own story and prior self- exploration of my body’s experiences, which will be shared in my own narrative. I was already quite comfortable with the subject matter, having contemplated the experiences of the journeying body long before even proposing this research. Coming into the genuine conversations with the women, therefore, was not a blind step in the dark for me; it was a natural progression for the interest and intrigue that had been growing for some time. I engaged this high degree of self-awareness into the authentic

dialogue, and, as the women were sharing their own bodily experiences, my own thoughts and understandings were playing in my mind.

My pre-understandings allowed me to remain connected to the topic during the interviews, while at the same time giving myself the necessary space to listen fully to the stories of the women. These assumptions thus acted as a sort of foundation of which I was aware, but that I did not rest upon completely. Therefore, I left that curious space open for new information and insights to emerge, while feeling secure and grounded in my own tacit knowledge and pre-understandings. I was not fully enmeshed within my own body stories, but rather utilized them as a means of comparison, affirmation, or reflection for the experiences as relayed by the participants.

My own connection to this research allowed me to remain in the moment with the women, and be proactive in the manner in which I encouraged them to share their journeys authentically and openly. It helped me facilitate exploration for the women so that the process was gentle and smooth. In exploring these experiences with myself prior to conducting the interviews, I was well aware of the challenges that the women might potentially experience as they contemplated their own journeys in such depth, and largely for the first time. I was confident in being with the women as they clarified questions, paused in their own stories for personal reflection, and, at times, stumbled through their stories, going backwards and forwards with their experiences, as I myself had done the same thing. I had been there myself with similar questions, ponderings, and uncertainties, and so felt quite able to guide this experience with the women.

Such experiences reflect the ideas of various theorists who have discussed the power, presence, and necessity of recognizing pre-understandings. Chang (2010) acknowledges the

importance of coming into the research fully, leaving nothing behind, stating that “Since it is impossible to escape from our pre-understanding, it is imperative to actively engage it, incorporate it, and utilize it as the basis for new understandings” (p.23). Debesay, Naden and Slettebo (2008) agree, identifying that:

Our prejudices or pre-understandings are necessary conditions for our understanding of the present. This recognition stems from the fact that we never meet the world without prejudice, but with preconceived expectations of it based on prior experience. Consequently, understanding takes place when a fusion of horizons of past and present occurs. (p.58).

### *Fusion of Horizons*

The concept of “fusion of horizons” is integral in Gadamer’s approach, and illuminates the connection not only between past and present modes of thinking and knowing, but between the understandings and interpretations of the individuals engaging in dialogue (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Debesay, Naden & Slettebo, 2008). This is the fourth element of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutic perspectives that I have engaged in my work. Debesay, Naden and Slettebo (2008) describe such a fusion of horizons as occurring when one’s own pre-understandings meet and/or collide with those of another individual, and new insights emerge. Binding and Tapp (2008) discuss the challenge that can result from listening to another’s perspective and integrating it into our own, thereby fusing individual horizons into one collective space. They state that:

Perhaps, if we really listen to participants, there is a risk that we might hear something that is unsettling, a risk that we might hear something that would be easier not to hear. Perhaps, really listening is risky. When something emerges from a genuine conversation, we cannot prescribe or predict what that something will be. It is the encounter with

another's truth that allows something else to emerge. (p.129).

It is in contemplation and interpretation that we allow the surfacing of new ways of thinking, being, and knowing. Holroyd (2007) describes a potential outcome of such a fusion of horizons, purporting that "The inquirer is prepared to surrender, through a stance of openness, what he or she currently knows, and it is in this surrender that the inquirer has the potential to be transformed" (p.3).

An example of such fusion of horizons occurred as the result of an interview which invited me to view bodily connection through a perspective that varied considerably from my own personal pre-understanding of the process. As Sarah was revealing the challenging story of her body, having been diagnosed suddenly with breast cancer at a young age, it was evident that bodily connection, or re-connection in her case, was not perceived by her as a joyous experience, as it seemed to be for the other women, and as it had been in my own experience. Sarah shared that, while she was now feeling a sense of connection with her body once again, it was not a strong connection as she had previously enjoyed prior to her cancer experience. This new perspective invited me to view another layer of the experience of connection, and facilitated within me an awareness that connection with the body is not always a positive experience.

Through Sarah's story, an awareness emerged that connection with the body is a highly individualized process, dependent on an interplay of factors, including one's own earlier experiences of connection. This particular narrative challenged me to expand my own understanding, and to incorporate it within a new, multi-dimensional framework, one that was perhaps not comforting to me, but that added further textured and meaning to my own conceptualization of the journeying body's experiences. Practicing reflexivity, I was able to perceive the divide between my own perspective and Sarah's, which provides me with a more

complex understanding of the concepts of bodily dis/connection, and thereby further, and holistically, informs and expands my research.

### *Hermeneutic Circle*

Another element of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics engaged in my study is the hermeneutic circle. As is evident from the descriptions of growing and shifting awareness, my research has clearly not taken a linear path from start to finish. In a similar manner as the dynamic experiences of the journeying body that this inquiry seeks to explore, this study itself has included ample twisting and turning, contemplating and re-thinking, wondering and moving between, across, through, and between ideas and understandings as new understandings and insights come to light and as others become strengthened, further nuanced, and/or changed. The research journey that I have taken is deeply rooted in and reflective of the hermeneutic circle, which celebrates such an evolving process of interpretation and understanding (Chang, 2010; Debesay, Naden & Slettebo, 2008).

Debesay, Naden, and Slettebo (2008) describe such an evolving and moving process, sharing that "Understanding is achieved by our interpreting within a circular process, in which we move from a whole to the individual parts and from the individual parts to the whole through the hermeneutic circle" (p.58). Within this research, an appreciation of the circular movement of understanding has allowed me to engage in a holistic exploration of the processes which I seek to understand. An awareness of the hermeneutic circle has encouraged me examine and interpret the individual pieces of the women's journeys, in the context of their complete narratives, to gain new ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the experiences of the journeying body as a whole, and then returning to their stories with fresh insights and perspectives, based on my understanding of the collectivity of experiences, that deepen and colour my understanding.

My interaction with the hermeneutic circle in this research has happened in the following way. As discussed previously, I entered this research filled with multiple pre-understandings and assumptions, in addition to a myriad of questions, curiosities, contemplations. I engaged the women in genuine dialogue, as earlier shared, and experienced a shifting and shaping of perspectives whilst fusing my own horizons with theirs. After hearing the women's stories in conversation, I meticulously listened to the audio recordings of our interviews, transcribed their dialogue word for word, and read their transcripts several times with an attentive eye.

It was at this early point in the process that some of my pre-understandings were stirred to life, and others were in the beginning stages of being challenged or enhanced. This was the first time that I had actually engaged in dialogue of this nature on a topic that was so dear to me, and my mind was alert and aware of new burgeoning insights and affirmations of what I already felt that I knew. After transcribing the interviews, I thereafter began the process of writing the women's narratives, based on their stories and insights. The women were then provided with their narratives to review; they were encouraged to alter or edit their narratives as they chose, and were invited to offer me any feedback or suggestions that they desired. At this stage in the research process, the concept of the hermeneutic circle was very much alive and in motion; it was after having written and read each of the women's narratives that my own prior understandings and assumptions noticeably began to shift and grow. I was now able to add to my understandings both the meanings gleaned from the individual experiences of the women, as well as the collective ideas that emerged from the landscape of the women's experiences.

In connecting to the individual stories of the women, I was also able to connect to the totality of their experiences, and it was at this time that the shared themes woven throughout the narratives began to emerge in all of their messiness and fullness. A growing awareness led me to

contemplate further the instability of the body experience, and the ways in which such instability seemed to be integral in what many of the narratives discussed as “the female experience”. I began to perceive that the challenges and turbulence that I had experienced within my own body were actually quite similar to those of the women, regardless of how our individual stories seemed to differ. I also started to take note of the means and frequencies in which the women shifted between experiences of disconnection and connection, which powerfully challenged my own conceptualization of this shift, as will be described in a further chapter. Then, with the emergence of these new seemingly collective meanings, I was able to return to the individual narratives of the women and to observe how these themes may have been reinforced or prevalent in their own experiences. I was thereafter able to perceive their stories with a more holistic understanding and deeper sense of honouring and appreciation of their individual experiences, as well as a more nuanced awareness of our shared collective experiences.

Even to this day, the narratives having been written for more than a year, and the findings section having been completed for several weeks, I am still stirred from time to time by a sudden question or understanding that makes me return the stories and see them with a new or enhanced awareness and appreciation. Thus, the hermeneutic circle continues subconsciously for me, as it likely always will. Because several of the women in this study are in my life on a regular basis --two of them being friends with whom I have engaged in body-related discussions since the time of our interviews -- I have been able to add to my understanding both of my own experiences, and theirs, through dialogue outside of the research context. I could conceivably add further detail to Holly’s narrative, for example, and unearth further understandings, as her own journeying body has continued to shift and flow significantly since the time of her interview. She has lived quite an embodied experience as of late, as the twins with whom she was pregnant



during our interview are now beautiful and healthy toddlers, and the journeys of her body now include such experiences as breastfeeding, taking care of the body while taking care of other bodies, and body image in motherhood. These topics could not have been explored with her during the course of our interview, but they would likely now add to the richness of the data of this research, and would likely carve out new paths of knowledge and understanding.

In addition, Robyn and I have had similar conversations about the shifting nature of the body, and this, too, could provide further support to the data. I would be very interested in meeting with the other women as well to discuss how their own bodily experiences may have shifted or grown since the time of our interviews. With Sarah, it would be interesting to explore her relationship with her body now, being even further removed from her cancer experience than she was at the time of our interview.

However, there comes a point at which I must make the conscious choice to close the hermeneutic circle, for the time being, and to honour the data and stories as they are, in the fullness of their beauty and power at a particular time in the women's life journeys. As it is, this work is a constantly evolving creation that is endlessly shifting and becoming more colourful and meaningful, the more attention and awareness that is given to it. It has expanded and grown in ways that I could not have perceived at the beginning of the journey. As will be clear in my own narrative, as well as in the analysis and discussions chapter, as time passes my own insights and interpretations become deeper and more multi-layered. I truly believe that this current research could be an ongoing process that would alter and shift with new experiences, knowledge, meanings, and time. I would be interested in engaging in similar research in the future, to observe how the addition of life experiences, awareness, and knowledge may facilitate the emergence of new understandings and perspectives.

## *Transformation*

The final element of hermeneutic inquiry that informs this study is the potential for transformation. I believe that research such as this has the power to transform each person involved. Binding and Tapp (2008) would seem to agree, as they propose that hermeneutic inquiry, taking place in a space of curiosity and sincerity, can be transformational on multiple levels. As these authors share, a hermeneutic framework supports the creation of meaning in the dynamic interplay of the authentic dialogue, as discussed earlier, and it can be equally transformational for the researcher and participant. Binding and Tapp (2008) suggest that “Conversation holds possibilities to transform productively not only the understanding of the topic, but also the very being of the participants in the dialogue”(p.122). Through the genuine conversation, topics are brought to life, horizons are fused together, understandings evolve, and transformation of thinking, being, and feeling can occur. Each person may leave the conversation enriched with further awareness and appreciation (Binding & Tapp, 2008).

Moules (2002) likewise recognizes the transformational potential of hermeneutic inquiry, sharing that “Hermeneutics demands that we proceed delicately and yet wholeheartedly, and, as a result of what we study, we carry ourselves differently, and we live differently” (p.24). The notion of the hermeneutic circle is an important element of this transformation, as it is through the dynamic dialogue, between the researcher and participant and thereafter with the researcher and the texts, that meanings are created and transformation may occur. I, myself, have been significantly transformed by my role with this research, through interviewing the women, developing stronger and more intimate relationships with them, spending time interacting with their stories playfully and curiously, writing their narratives in a respectful manner, processing and exploring my own experiences, and feeling connected to the women because of our shared

journeys. The genuine conversations that I have enjoyed, the candid texts that I have read, the powerful narratives that I have compiled, and the collective and personal meanings that have been created in dialogue with the women: each of these was a multi-faceted and meaningful experience that has shifted my way of thinking and being, and I am honoured and humbled for having experienced such a transformational research process.

This transformational quality thereby informs my own research, as the act of conducting research of this nature has transformed not only my ways of understanding the movements of the journeying body, but it has also deepened my awareness of the relatability of women, and of how our experiences – of a somatic nature or not – may be connected. Similarly, in speaking with several of the women post-interviews and post-narrative review, I am delighted to hear of new insights that have come to light, inspired by the open sharing of their stories, and of transformations that have occurred because of the awareness that they have given to their bodily experiences. Thus, I would agree that one of the most lasting and meaningful impacts of hermeneutic inquiry, through Gadamer's approach, is its transformative potential for researcher and participants alike (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Moules, 2002).

The abovementioned elements of Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics have supported and facilitated my rich understanding and genuine engagement of aspects of qualitative research that I value deeply. These elements have enabled me to be with the women in a very authentic way, which has added to the intimate nature of our conversations and the respectful manner with which their stories were honoured and held. I believe that, due to the nature of this topic, it was vital to embody such positive characteristics with the women, and to hold true to these elements at all points of this research journey. In the following section, I will describe how these elements of hermeneutics and qualitative research have supported and informed my engagement of

narrative representation, the vehicle through which the stories of the women are expressed.

### Narrative Representation

Grounded in hermeneutic inquiry, my research is represented through narratives that explore the dynamic experiences of the journeying body. I have chosen to represent the data in such a format with the belief that narratives and hermeneutic inquiry are complementary processes, and that narrative representation thereby provides an effective means through which the hermeneutic perspective may be engaged. Wiklund, Lindhom, and Lindstrom (2002) propose that “The narrative is a hermeneutic project in itself because it is by narration that we structure our interpretations of the world (i.e. narration is the core of understanding, which was the first interest of hermeneutics)” (p. 115). Stories are a vital means through which we are able to give voice to our experiences, and to derive meaning therein. The nature of my research reflects this search for meaning, and, thus it is fitting that my study would adopt this approach, as it is the lived journeys of the body that I seek, and the meanings that women create in relation to their bodily experiences as they journey between, from, through, and across disconnection and connection.

The genuine conversations and authentic dialogue feeding this research are expressed through the construction of narratives of their bodily journeys. There are several specific reasons for which I feel that narrative representation is in alignment with the purposes of this study; I will now briefly describe those reasons. Firstly, this form of representation captures and depicts the power of the women’s journeys as a whole, in a manner such that the totality of their stories become more than the sum of the individual experiences themselves. The narrative format thus respects the fluid motion of the hermeneutic circle. Narrative representation is thereby suitable for this research in its ability to showcase the nuanced and evolving movements of the body,

bringing to light the complexities of the women's stories in an honouring and respectful manner. The rich and often challenging and tumultuous narratives of the women provide contextualized meaning to the reader, enabling a depth of connection and understanding that is captivating and highly personal, revealing bodies in energetic motion.

Another reason for my choice of narrative representation centres on the situated nature of narratives (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). Representing the women's experiences as complex narratives permits a location of the women's journeys as they transition between experiences of disconnection and connection with the body. In capturing the complexities of the stories, a narrative form of representation situates the women's journey in a rich and meaningful way. It is essential to highlight the situated nature of narratives, and that the fact that, through narratives, it is not just the person to whom we are being acquainted, but to the social, cultural, political, historical, and relational spheres that inform their lives as well (Moen, 2006). Thus, meaning making may ripple from the personal to the collective. I appreciate Moen's (2006) proposal that:

As individuals are telling their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context. On the contrary, it is important to remember that the individual in question is irreducibly connected to her or his social, cultural, and institutional setting. Narratives, therefore, capture both the individual and the context. (p. 60).

In honouring the contextually-situated manner of the stories, we are simultaneously honouring the postmodern foundation of this study, which encourages the shifting and multi-layered nature of lived experiences. I feel that by representing the women's experiences in a narrative format, the richness and power of the data is able to be seen clearly and appreciated, coming to life before the readers' eyes.

It is my belief that the power of the women's journeys can best be expressed, explored, and celebrated through the telling of their narratives. It is the narrative format that permits the beauty, mystery, and meaning of their journeys to be displayed in a positive, empowering, and enlightening light. Jameson's (1981) description of the power of narratives speaks to me, suggesting that "These events recover their original urgency only if retold within the unity of a single great collective story...only if seen as sharing a single fundamental theme" (p.3) and that they "need to be grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot" (p.4). Similarly, I acknowledge the words of Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2008) as they identify the power of a narrative framework in being "able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change" (p.1). Each of these theorists reflect my understanding of narrative representation as being a transformative means of holding the unique experiences of individuals, as well as connecting us with common threads of meaning. The narratives of the women in this study resonate on an individual and collective level, revealing shared meanings of growth, fluctuation, and awareness, as will be discussed in the final chapter.

#### Selection of Participants

I will now briefly describe various other particulars of the research process, including the selection of participants, and the experience of the interviews. Upon initially proposing this research, it was my intention to advertise publicly, via various community organizations, in order to seek participants for the study. However, in speaking with friends and acquaintances about my ideas, I quickly attracted six women within my own social and work spheres who expressed interest in the research topic and who committed themselves to the study. I utilized criterion sampling in order to engage participants who fulfilled a certain number of essential criteria that

were pertinent to my study (Cresswell, 2009). Such criteria included gender, connection with the topic, willingness to communicate stories, and health stability.

Firstly, each of the participants had to self-identify as female, as well as relate to the theme of transitioning from a sense of disconnection to connection with her body. While I was not seeking any one interpretation of the process of transition, nor any one experience of self-identifying as a female, it was important that the concepts of disconnection and connection had to resonate with the women in some capacity. The reasons behind their body experiences were not determining criteria in the selection of participants, as this study focuses on the meaning that emerges from the personal experiences of bodily journeys, as opposed to the reality of the experiences themselves. Another essential criteria required the women to be willing to share the story of their journeying body in an interview with me, which I would audio-tape and then transcribe. Likewise, they had to be open to communicating with me via email and/or in person throughout the course of the data analysis and the formation of my written thesis. There was also the understanding that a second interview may have been requested, if deemed necessary for further data collection.

A final essential criteria centered on the notion of health stability, mentally and physically. I was mindful in selecting participants who were not undergoing any sort of mental crisis or emergency at that time, and who were in relatively stable physical health. I appreciate that health is a relative concept. However, I made this a requirement with the desire to not have any mental or physical instability impact the process of the interviews. I also did not want to expose a woman experiencing a mental or physical crisis to vulnerability to the degree that this research potentially invites. It was also important for the parameters of my research that the selected women were able to engage, to a certain degree, in emotional self-regulation should

emotions arise during the course of the interviews.

### Interview Process

Semi-structured interviews formed the basis of my study. I had prepared in advance a list of five semi-structured and open-ended questions, each of which had two related sub-questions. As is the nature of hermeneutic scholarship, the questions were asked simply to invite discussion, and were flexible to allow the women to take the interview in any direction of their choosing as they created their own sense of meaning and interpretation of their journeying body's experiences (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011). I encouraged the women to be free with the questions, and to speak from their heart, without worrying about staying "on track". The interview were episodic in nature (Murray, 2008), as they invited the women to speak of their own personal experiences, in the form of narratives, of the key concepts of bodily disconnection, connection, and transition. Episodic interviews, as Murray (2003) relays, are interested in seeking "detailed narrative accounts about the participant's experiences with these topics. The role of the interviewers is to emphasize to the participants that they would like them to expand on their personal experiences" (p.103).

Although the questions had been written very mindfully, and with direct connection to the concepts derived from the literature review, the questions were fluid in nature. That is, they were open to evolving and changing, as I or the women deemed necessary. For example, in exploring the transition towards bodily connection, I had initially listed five conversation areas to invite potential dialogue for the women: how the transition impacted them emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. I had neglected potential sexual impacts of bodily connection, and a few of the women brought this matter to the surface during their interviews. I thought that this facet of their stories certainly needed exploring, and, so, I added it



in for the remaining participants. I connected with the participants who had not initially spoken of such, and asked them if they would like to describe how or if their body's movements had impacted them on a sexual level.

The interview process itself was also a fluid process, which varied in length for each woman, and unfolded over a course of six months. I had initially advised the women that the interview would last approximately two hours in length. The shortest interview took an hour and a half, while the longest lasted nearly five hours, with short breaks staggered between questions, to honour the length of time the participant felt she needed to share her story. The interviews each took place at the homes of the women, which allowed the participants to feel comfortable and safe. Although it was not a requirement for the interviews to take place at their homes, each of the women chose this location themselves. Privacy was a very important factor in the determination of a safe space for the interviews, as the intimate nature of the research was best-suited for purely one-on-one interaction with minimum noise or distraction.

#### My Role as Researcher

As a researcher, one of my primary responsibilities was to maintain the safety of the participants at each step of the journey. It was a priority for me to ensure that the women felt comfortable while sharing their personal stories, and were open to the idea of placing their narratives in the public domain. To facilitate the research process safely and respectfully, I relinquished a certain amount of control to the women, as both hermeneutic and narrative inquiries encourage, and worked in tangent with them so that I would fairly and fully represent their voices.

To engage the women's voices, semi-structured and open-ended interview questions were created with flexibility in mind, so as to engage storytelling while leaving space for the women

to shift and flow in any direction that they desired. Once each interview was completed, I transcribed the audiotape and sent the transcript to the participant for verification. I encouraged the women to read their transcript carefully, and to feel free to alter, add, omit, or change any part of their story that they desired. In addition, as mentioned earlier, I emphasized to the women that they were at liberty to alter their own names in the narratives, to further disguise their identity. Vandermause and Fleming (2011) emphasize the importance of names in hermeneutic inquiry, highlighting the mindful engagement of language and meaning in such a study. Although the opportunity to use a different name was offered at several times to the women throughout the research journey, the participants did not initially express any desire to conceal their identities.

Towards the end of the research, as the final submission date was looming, I questioned the women once again, to verify that they were still in agreement with the use of their real names in the research, knowing that this document would be published and the findings utilized by myself in various ways, and wanting to ensure that the women would be comfortable with their real first names being attached to their stories in the public domain. It was at this time that one of the women opted to use a pseudonym, but to keep everything else in her narrative intact. Each of the other women verified that they still desired to use their real first name, three of whom directly expressed that their decision was grounded in an acceptance and ownership of their story, and an understanding that their narrative forms an important part of who they are. One woman expressed the insight that she feels as though she has moved past her story, while another of the women thanked me for having approached such a messy topic that “other people shy away from talking about”. All in all, I felt that each of the women were comfortable with their narrative, the names and details used, and the way in which it had been constructed.

Another priority of mine as a researcher was to engage in reflexivity, which Etherington (2004) defines “as the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experience and contexts (which may be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry” (p.31). As discussed previously, this is essential in hermeneutic inquiry. Shaw (2010) further proposes that:

By engaging in reflexivity, that is, proactively exploring our *self* at the start of our research inquiry, we can enter into a dialogue with participants and use each participants’ presentation of self to help revise our fore-understanding and come to make sense of the phenomenon anew. (p.235).

Being aware of the importance of reflexivity increased my self-awareness about myself as both an individual and a researcher, so that I would perceive when and how my own perspectives might intertwine with and diverge from those of the participants. I was thus able to ensure that my own musings, knowledge, and experiences did not colour or overpower the stories of the participants. I will now describe a few understandings of reflexivity that inform my research, as well as provide a direct example of the presence of reflexivity in this study.

Many theorists highlight the importance of being aware of one’s own positioning while undertaking research. Shaw (2010) suggests that “We experience and interpret the world from a particular perspective and we can never fully escape this subjectivity . . . we each have our own presuppositions, beliefs, predilections, and these make up our own horizon (or sphere) of understanding” (p.235). Murray (2003) focuses on reflexivity in the context of narrative inquiry, identifying that “The researcher brings to the interview a range of expectations that may encourage certain narratives and inhibit others” (p.102). He cautions that researchers must, therefore, be mindful of how their “presence can shape the interview” (Murray, 2003, p.102),

such that personal pre-conceptions do not colour the stories that the participant chooses to share.

Andrews (2008) likewise acknowledges the reality of the researcher, stating that:

[Researchers] bring to our research knowledge, which we have acquired through our life's experiences, and indeed how we make sense of what we observe and hear is very much influenced by that framework of understanding. This positioning is not static, but evolves over the course of our lives. New experiences, and new understanding of old experiences bring with them a new perspective not only on our own lives – our present, as well as our pasts – but on the way in which we make sense of the lives of others.

(p.86).

Reflexivity was certainly present throughout my own research journey. Multiple life experiences, as well as a keen interest in the topic, provided me with a foundation of awareness and understanding even before the research process began. I had already been reading books about various body experiences, and I had my own multi-faceted bodily journeys fresh in mind. In addition to extensive reading on the subject, I maintained a personal journal, of which many of the entries involved my growing fascination with the journeying body. Such journal writing continued, and intensified, as I began to speak to the women and to listen to their somatically-informed stories. While my journal entries were not intended to be of use to my research, it is now evident to me, in retrospect, that I was deeply impacted by the women's stories, and that I was using my journal as a means of expressing, reflecting, and integrating new understandings into my own personal schemas, as I previously discussed in the context of fusion of horizons earlier in this chapter.

## Ethical Considerations

Throughout each part of this research journey, I was conscious of respecting and adhering to the ethical guidelines set forth by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University. One of the most important ethical considerations for this study involved obtaining informed consent (Miller & Bell, 2012; Seidman, 2013). I was conscientious when both asking for and receiving informed consent from the participants. I ensured that each of the women was fully aware of their rights and responsibilities as participants, and that they understood how they would be protected and supported throughout the course of the study. Each of the participants was provided with an information letter (Appendix B) as well as a document of informed consent (Appendix C), both of which detailed essential aspects of the study: a description of the project's purpose, format, procedures, potential benefits and risks, duration of participation, role of engagement, as well as the utilization of, reporting of, and security/storage of the data collected.

The adherence to confidentiality was also clearly explained to the women, as was the notion of anonymity. Steps were clearly identified to further ensure that their identities remain concealed, if they so desired. The notion of voluntary participation was also explained, including their liberty to leave the research study at any time. I outlined what would happen to their data if they did ultimately decide to withdraw from participation at a later date. The letter of informed consent were provided to the women in both paper and email formats. I encouraged the women to read the document carefully, and to ask any questions for further clarification. Once the letter of informed consent was signed, I photocopied each of the forms, and gave a copy to each of the women. The original forms were then kept secure.

## Dual Relationships

One potential ethical consideration that arose in my research was that of dual relationships (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). As previously noted, all of the participants in the study were known to me through various life roles, including social and work spheres, and thus, I was more to them than simply a researcher. I had known the participants for different lengths of time, and in varying capacities: the longest that I had known a participant was several years prior to the interviews, while shortest amount of time that I had known a participant was just a few months. The experience of dual relationship was a stimulating and positive situation, and I feel like this connection to the participants was appropriate, ethical, and beneficial to the research.

Being in relationship with each of the women – although in some cases only casually – added texture and depth to the inquiry, and yet this also posed some potential challenges for me, as a neophyte researcher (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; McDermid et al, 2014; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) discuss the strengths and challenges of using “friendship as method”. They share that, while the first author was conducting research by interviewing friends, “She found that the friendship dimension both enhanced her research relationships and also generated particular challenges” (p. 285). My own experiences reflect well this multi-dimensional perspective. I will now outline a few of the advantages and disadvantages that I encountered while interviewing friends, as in alignment with the ethical nature of my study.

Firstly, I recognize the benefit in the situation, knowing that, because of our mutual familiarity, some of the women in my study were perhaps inclined to be more candid with me than they would potentially have been with a researcher unknown to them. This openness may

have produced a depth of data that of the quality that arises from a trusting, respectful, and familiar relationship (McDermid et al, 2014). Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) appreciate conducting research with friends as “a level of investment where researcher and friendship roles weave together, expand and deepen each other” (p. 286). It is for this reason that I believe that the depth of relationship between people may enrich the data, just as the data shared between people may deepen the relationship and bring people closer together, which I felt with some of the women as a result of this inquiry.

Being rooted in prior relationship, the research relationships in my study were fed with a deeper sense of connection, and thus empathy, respect, sensitivity, and appreciation – important elements of both research and friendship – were already present, allowing an honouring of stories on a much more personal level. This already-present connection seemed to increase the authenticity of the dialogue between myself and the participants, facilitating an opening to further genuine conversation (McDermid et al, 2014).

Furthermore facilitating the authenticity of the dialogue was the awareness that I was also an “insider” to the research, as Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009) suggest, in regard to my deep and personal connection to the topic of exploration. I am essentially a member of the population I was seeking to explore, which Corbin Dwyer & Buckle (2009) posit, “automatically provides a level of openness and trust . . .that would likely not have been present otherwise [in the interview context]” (p. 58). Several of the women in this study were aware of my passion for the topic, even if they did not know most of the personal reasons fueling this passion; I believe that my noticeable connection to the topic equally facilitated an open, deep, and trusting dialogue with the participants, providing a “common ground from which to begin the research” (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58).

However, the challenge of this situation stems from the reality that, for three of the six women, I was essentially interviewing good friends, and that I was familiar with the other three participants from other life spheres. Thus, while being very comfortable with them as peers, I sought to maintain a certain professional distance that enabled me to explore their stories with an attuned eye, which at times presented a challenge to my newly emerging researcher skills. Owton and Allen-Collison (2014), highlighting the work of Garton and Copland (2010), recognize this challenge, proposing how research with friends may “breach interactional norms of interviewing” and that “The closer the prior relationship, the harder the participants work to reconcile their diverse identities” (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014, p. 287).

While I felt comfortable interviewing each of the women, at times I wondered where the boundary lay between myself as a researcher, and myself as their friend or acquaintance. McDermid et al (2014) highlight the challenge that such a “maintenance of clear boundaries (p.29) presents to the research context. I do not feel that this awareness of boundaries restricted me, or negatively influenced my behaviour during the sessions, but it certainly did play across my mind, adding to my growing awareness of reflexivity. I agree with Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) as they propose that engaging in research with friends “demands that as researchers we engage in acute and sustained reflexivity and self-scrutiny, contextually shifting between ‘studying them to studying us’” (p.287).

My level of familiarity with the women thus added to the comfort and ease felt during the interviews, and the ways in which we interacted in an easygoing, informal manner. I do not believe that this degree of familiarity was of any negative consequence to the research, as it actually aided in the flow of the interviews, and hence had a positive impact on the collection of the data. The interviews took place in a space of respect, camaraderie, and trust, which I hope



that each of the women felt. As each of the women were aware of my deep interest in bodily experiences, I believe that they felt comfortable and safe sharing their stories aloud. They were each enthusiastic in delving into the topic with me, seemingly trusting me and the questions that I posed. Nobody expressed any discomfort with any of the questions, and they were all very much eager to reply openly and honestly. In having prior relationships with each of the women, we were able to dive into the material quickly, and to arrive perhaps at a more authentic understanding than if we had simply met for the first time, which certainly added power and texture to the stories shared (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

### Constructing the narratives

It is important to examine the ways in which I have created the narratives of the women's experiences, as well as the voice that I have chosen to engage. I have already discussed my use of the third person perspective in composing their narratives, as well as my recognition of the voice that I have privileged in doing so. I have also indicated my endeavour to honour the voices of the women through employing frequent direct quotations to add power and personal meaning to the sharing of their stories. Each narrative begins with a personal introduction, written from my point of view, showcasing my own personal understandings of the women, which include both my prior knowledge of them and my enhanced awareness gained from the interview process. I engaged my own tacit familiarity with the women to describe them in their fullness and individuality within their introductions.

Throughout the narratives, I drew from sub-themes emerging from the data that seemed to represent the movements of the journeying body. In so doing, I ensured to attend to the importance of representing the complexity and situatedness of their individual journeys while also attending to the dynamic interplay between the whole and the parts of the story, as

consistent with the hermeneutic circle. The narratives were written primarily in an active tense to relay the evolving body experience more directly to the reader, honouring the body's fluctuations and growths. The final chapter of this thesis will explore these narratives in detail, to bring forth further meaning from the energetic and engaging experiences of the journeying body.

### Writing my narrative

In Appendix D, I share my narrative in order to clearly locate myself within this inquiry. This is done for three reasons: to explore and share my own pre-understandings as a researcher consistent with the aims and work of hermeneutic inquiry; to engage feminist principles I hold as a researcher; and to further locate my own narrative and assumptions within the context of the academic literature.

The evolution of self-understanding is an essential component of hermeneutic inquiry. As previously explored, hermeneutics integrates the acknowledgement of pre-understandings and self-assumptions (Binding & Tapp, 2008; Chang, 2010; Debesay, Naden & Slettebo, 2008). In fact, its very tenets rest on the notion of the researcher being clear about their own prior knowledge of a subject, and how it shifts and changes throughout the exploration of such. I chose to construct my own personal narrative of transition with my body as a means to examine explicitly my own story and its underlying pre-understandings. It provides an upfront means to self-examine as well as share with the reader the influences that my experiences have had in shaping my perceptions of the movements of the journeying body. This process has allowed me as a researcher to explicitly acknowledge, process, and utilize my own understandings within the context of the hermeneutic inquiry processes of ongoing dialogical engagement with research participants and their texts (Chang, 2010).

The construction of my own narrative also reflects feminist values I brought to this work as a researcher. As a feminist researcher, I feel that it is important to experience myself the tasks that I was asking the participants to do. Therefore, before beginning the interview process, I was interviewed by my research supervisor, using the same interview questions that were formulated for the participants. In addition to this, I also interviewed myself in greater detail, made an audio recording of such, and transcribed my interview. I recognize that I needed to engage the courage to tell and share my own narrative in this research, to expose myself and my own turbulent journey, rather than simply asking the participants to be candid and open with their own narratives. In telling my story, I was able to move deeper into the place of knowing and owning my journey, and in so doing was able to offer a more empowered, grounded, and safe container, as a researcher to the women, as they told and made sense of their own stories.

In critically examining my own story, there are several themes and pre-understanding that became evident. I share this analysis in order to make explicit central experiences and assumptions I brought as a researcher to this study, as well as pre-understandings that are essential aspects of the hermeneutic framework supporting this study. Two valuable insights that I gained about my pre-understandings stemming from critically exploring my own journey involve the equally fluid and tumultuous nature of bodily experiences. My narrative illustrates an unfolding process of transition and growth. It shares an ongoing experience, as my journeying body continues its movement between experiences of disconnection and connection. This story thus reveals a body in motion, and an awareness that is freshly evolving. My journey also shares a tale of empowerment rooted in vulnerability, turbulence, and confusion. This research has had its growing pains on a personal level. I have had to adapt to my own shifts and transitions

throughout the writing of this thesis, and have experienced disconnect, connect, and transition at various points of this actual project. Therefore, the examination of the processes explored takes place not only from a curious external view; I am living them, truly, in my everyday life as a researcher and a woman.

A third reason for the construction of my narrative involved gaining further insight into my own pre-understandings by situating my narrative in relation to the academic literature and to bring both into dialogue with the other. In doing so, several further insights were gained. My experiences with bodily connection as a child, for instance, resonate with the work of numerous theorists, as explored in chapter two of this research, who state that we are born in an inherent space of connection with our body. The experiences that triggered my own disconnect find themselves represented in the literature as well. The multiple shifts that have shaped my own story reflect discussions in the literature regarding the notions of movement between stages, and the desire to return to the innate sense of connection that was previously felt between body and mind. The literature has thus provided me with an understanding that others have articulated some of the processes and experiences that I have encountered and conceptualized on my journey. Yet, I believe that there is a space within the literature for a more nuanced exploration of the shifting experiences of the body, such as this current inquiry aims to unpack.

## Chapter Four: Narratives of the journeying body

### Holly's narrative

#### Inviting

Holly, to me, radiates health and vitality: glowing cheeks indicate a recent outdoor adventure, sparkling eyes reveal enthusiasm for the interview that is about to unfold, and brilliantly red lips -- which, I have learned, is her signature look, even at the end of a gruelling marathon -- welcome me with a smile. A Registered Dietitian, Holly focuses on helping her clients develop a more nourishing relationship with food and their bodies. This evening, the spotlight is focused inwards on Holly as a person, not as a professional, and the choices and experiences that she has encountered in her own journey towards developing such a relationship. Her story is one that begins grounded in food, control, and fear, and shifts naturally and beautifully towards movement, awareness, and appreciation.

#### Achieving

We begin exploring the story of her journeying body through the lens of disconnect. From Holly's perspective, bodily disconnect occurs when one no longer hears the body's wisdom, spoken through cues of hunger, exhaustion, and intuition. Her own initial experience of bodily detachment began rather unintentionally, stemming from a time in her life in which she had genuinely intended to adopt a healthier way of living, by exercising regularly and making more conscious food choices. Such changes inspired positive feedback from other people; she, quite unexpectedly, began to receive compliments on her body and its changing form. A self-proclaimed "Type A personality", Holly was highly motivated by this feedback, and was also energized by the exciting challenge that she had set upon herself to become healthy and fit.

With such fire alighting her body and mind, Holly adopted a new routine of going to the gym each morning at 5am, and aligning her eating habits with her strict workout regime. Her sole purpose of eating became to ingest the minimum amount of energy that would enable her to maximize her exercise each day. She fueled her body relatively well at this time, for the sole purpose of giving her the strength needed to be as physical as she desired to be, and suggests that “with exercise, that was probably the time when I made sure I fueled my body”. Being a highly disciplined person, Holly established rigid rules to follow along the path to her goal, and she adhered to the guidelines perfectly, despite the hungry protests of her body. Disregarding her body’s signals, Holly would eat only at particular times, and she would curb her incessant pangs of hunger by chewing gum or sucking on candy outside of her strictly-regulated meal times. Following “Oprah’s rule” to a tee, she did not permit herself to eat anything after supper in the evening, and was constantly “waking up in the morning absolutely starving”. Hers became a life of eating, working out, waiting to eat, and then waiting again.

### Ignoring

Holly’s quest quickly morphed into a journey of inner absorption, as she became “pre-occupied with the numbers on the scale, the food, and thinking about it all the time”. This surveillance of food and weight triggered “a true disconnection” within her as she resisted her body’s voice, no matter how urgently it longed to communicate with her. Holly recalls paying little attention to her body’s internal cues of hunger and desire for nourishment, denying itself of its basic needs. She reflects upon this experience as though her body was “all of a sudden being driven by something outside of me”. She had, essentially, detached from an inner body experience, and was seemingly being controlled by some external force that was dictating her

thoughts and behaviour.

### Absorbing

While undergoing rapid bodily changes, Holly was seemingly in a particularly vulnerable state in which she was very receptive to the energies and actions of those surrounding her. The act of dieting, restricting, and monitoring her body was normalized for her at this time by female family members who, having joined Weight Watchers, would get together for weekly weigh-ins. Holly made the decision to join the program as well, following the meal plans, and pulling an ever tighter rein around her food intake each day. She recalls restricting everything, even her consumption of fruit, so as to stay within a strict point usage. Holly now perceives the absurdity of such a notion, but, at the time, she had become so enmeshed with the idea that scrutinizing, minimizing, and controlling the body and food were “what a female does” that she never thought to question these behaviours. And so, she dedicated herself to this new plan of restriction with “fairly rigid discipline”, despite admittedly feeling “hungry all the time, crooked, tired, grumpy, (and) sensitive”.

### Scrutinizing

As friends and family members began noticing Holly’s drastic change in body and personality, their concern accelerated. She describes her growing frustration, as the feedback that had once been her fuel -- positive and encouraging -- had abruptly become harsh, critical, obtrusive, negative, and unwelcome. She was enraged at how “it went from compliments, to all of a sudden people are starting to get concerned; they’re making a lot of comments, which ended up being actually more infuriating because then you feel like you’re being watched all the time”. Holly recalls having the impression that her body was no longer her own, now seemingly on

public display. The enhanced scrutiny had harmful effects, as it provoked her to “start to eat in front of people just to prove to people that (she was) eating”. She, thus, began to consume more than her body required or even wanted.

It was at this time that the “pendulum effect” was born within her, pushing Holly to oscillate between two extremes: she was “either in hunger, or in complete fullness”. On the one hand, Holly-in-private was starving her body, to maintain the picture of “health” that she had so diligently created; on the other hand, Holly-in-public was stuffing her body with copious amounts of food, to convince others that she was actually eating. She admits that “There was never that kind of happy medium where I was truly listening to what I needed. It was either not listening to myself by being hungry, or not listening to myself by stuffing myself to prove to other people that I was eating”. Neither brought her closer to her own physical experience; in fact, she drifted farther and farther away from connection with her body, as the pendulum continued to sway with increasing intensity.

### Choosing

Such detachment deepened for Holly throughout the twelfth grade. After graduation that year, she experienced her first intervention, wherein her mother requested that she weigh herself at the gym. It was upon looking at the scale, with her concerned mother next to her, that Holly realized that she had “probably taken this a bit too far”. There was no denying the truth written on the scale. She had absolutely no intention of hurting herself, for her quest had never been grounded in a desire for self-harm. Thus, as she viewed the low numbers in front of her, Holly’s rational mind sprang into action, and she swiftly changed her mindset, by re-defining a new vision of “health”, one that still incorporated conscious eating and exercise, but in a much less restrictive way. As Holly reveals, “I started trying to challenge myself a little bit with eating



different things, and realizing that nothing tragic was going to happen”. The only thing that was to happen would lead her in a new direction, wherein *health* meant something much different than what she had once believed.

### Awakening

The seeds of transition were, therefore, planted. Her parents had, on that day, given her an ultimatum: either she help herself gain weight, or they would send her for external support. Holly chose the former, persuading them that she would “deal with it”, admitting that she was “not willing to go see anyone about it, because I don’t think I could acknowledge how bad it was”. While Holly displays pride in her ability to engage in self-therapy while in a weakened state of body and mind, intermingled with this tenacity was also a burgeoning sense of anger. She was angry for having “to change what I was doing”, and she became “resentful that then the people who might have been complimenting me at first were not all of a sudden saying, ‘Oh wait now, you’ve gone too far; you’ve got to come back.’” This was an emotionally challenging period for her, as she was forced to “question some of the messages” that she had received from her surroundings, and disrupt deeply-entrenched patterns of thinking and being.

### Moving

For Holly, bodily connection truly began for her when she began hearing her body’s messages, and genuinely listening to and responding to its needs. The transition towards connection began visibly sprouting life for Holly when she joined a 10k running group at the Running Room in the September following her graduation year. At this point, she had survived a year of minimal nutrition and maximum disconnection, and had experienced her own personal epiphany of perception versus reality. She had journeyed from vulnerability to curiosity, in that her body and mind were now ready for new growths in understanding and being. The first growth that sprouted was movement, which would prove to be a lifeline in

Holly's newfound vision of health.

On her first night with the running club, not having any expectation of her ability or endurance, Holly ran 7km without actually realizing it. The resulting feeling of accomplishment was one of pure amazement and pride. To a goal-oriented individual, this became not only the endpoint in her disconnection, but the beginning of what would continue onwards as a lifelong move towards bodily connection. Holly was now fueled by the adrenaline of having challenged her body to the limits by running a far distance, rather than pushing her body tirelessly through starvation and control. She had made the shift, and it felt incredibly empowering for her body and mind.

Running with this club became a weekly activity for Holly, and she describes this episode in her life as being “the first time that I was moving my body not to burn calories, but it was actually to reach a goal”. Another shift occurred within Holly at this time as she realized the importance of nutrition in her quest for distance and endurance. It “clicked in with” her that if she truly wanted to be a runner, then proper nutrition had to be a top priority. Holly reminisces that “It kind of went from there, where the more I ran, the more I fueled my body”. She was now gradually untangling herself from an unhealthy fixation with her body, and her body began to thrive on its newfound freedom. Running became, for Holly, much more than a physical activity; it inspired movement and shifting on multiple levels within her life. Moving her body physically in this different way gave Holly the opportunity to journey from a position of working against her body, by controlling its intake and denying its needs, to a position of working with her body, by listening to its messages and responding appropriately. Her body was speaking loudly and clearly, as it had been for years, and she was finally ready to pursue communication with it.

One of Holly's strengths, present all throughout her journey, is her determination to achieve personal goals. As she shares, setting goals was important for her, and "that was the other positive thing about running for me, because it was like, ok, now, first it's going to be the Tely (16 km race), that will be my goal. And then a half-marathon, and then a full-marathon, and whatever else. The goal became, what can my body do, versus what can my body look like?" Running was, thereby, a "transition tool" that provided her with a fresh position of viewing herself and the world, helping prioritize the functionality of her body over its appearance.

### Becoming aware

Holly's awareness of her body grew with each run, as she became more coordinated with the new movements that her body was making. She explains that, "When you're running, all of a sudden your breathing is coordinated with your footsteps, and you're focusing on the position of your arms". Thus, bodily awareness allowed her to feel the specific movements of her body parts working together. Through this newly-developing awareness, Holly began to feel "like I was on the inside of my body, looking out". Rather than judging her body parts like an external observer, Holly adopted a more embodied approach, thinking, "Oh, here I am in my body, looking out at the world!" This was a "totally different switch from outside to in, and now inside, looking out".

Moving her body as a runner also provided Holly with a healthy social comparison, as she was now interacting with people for whom moving their body was a normal way of being. Running with a group gave her the opportunity "to experience many different bodies, being active and very healthy". Whereas once she had relied on magazines to provide her with an image of how a healthy body should appear, she was now able to find a stable source of healthy comparison in those with whom she was running. These people helped her normalize a new way

of moving and nourishing her body. Holly recalls going to Tim Hortons with several of the runners, one day after a race. As she watched a few of the women eating raisin tea biscuits, casually and happily, it suddenly struck Holly that she, too, was able to do that, without anything dramatic happening to her. Prior to this, she had been afraid of doing so, uncertain as to what would happen.

For all of these reasons, running became the foundation upon which Holly's connection to her body was re-built. She credits running as being "that (source of) reconnecting, because it was actually feeling in my body. It was appreciating my body; it was respecting my body". Holly describes the physical nature of running as being a life line in helping her actually feel her body once again, after such a period of feeling detached from her physical experience. "The running, the sweating, the moving, the heavy breathing . . . just being in the body was helpful" to her along her new path to bodily connection.

Holly soon began to notice a sort of "curiosity" enter her way of being, as she was becoming more attuned to her physical self. She compares this newly shifting experience to a "burden lifting", as "things were lightening up, and the voice inside my head and some of the rules were dropping". Once she had started to run, and to channel her energy in a new way, she was able to release some of her anger, leaving space for a new "kind of lightness" to enter. Gradually, she felt a lessening of the intensity of pre-occupation and self-loathing that had previously occupied her thoughts and behaviour, as she started to settle into this new way of being.

### Fluctuating

Holly advocates that body connection is not a static concept, believing, rather, that it is an evolving process which requires ongoing attention, focus, and energy. She illustrates this concept

with the image of the pendulum, which “has to swing a little bit” in order to discover its balance. She discloses that, upon taking the first step towards connection by beginning to fuel her body with proper nourishment, “It took me a while to be able to physically train myself to know when to stop, because I guess that this is a typical pattern, when you go from not eating to allowing yourself to eat. You go from starving to, oh my God, I’m finally eating food!” Holly shares that, “You were still almost like you were in that famine mode, where even though you were saying, I promise you. body, that I’m not going to restrict anymore, it still doesn’t believe you. So I guess from a physical part with the food, it took me a while again to get to a point where I was eating at a comfortable level where I physically felt comfortable, because I was either used to be starving or absolutely stuffed beyond all belief.” She acknowledges that, in returning from a place of near-starvation, a deep-rooted fear surfaces, in which the body is “so scared of ever being hungry again”. Holly gives voice to her body, revealing that it was as if her body was telling her, “You’ve said that before!” It is an interesting dialogue to hear, the dynamic between a body who has been betrayed by starvation, and a mind who is promising to never allow that to happen again.

Holly deeply understands bodily connection as a fluid concept, and she has gradually learned to accept the tendency of disconnection to seep through the cracks from time to time. She describes an incident one day in which, having started properly nourishing her body again and, perhaps, over-indulging it through the fear of starvation, she abruptly felt a very visceral negative reaction to her body. Holly details the feeling of the car seatbelt digging into her stomach while driving, and she recalls berating herself for having indulged to this point of discomfort. At this particular time, having experienced her epiphany of sorts, and having already started to move in the direction of bodily connection, she felt herself once again slipping backwards into the

clutches of disconnect. In this moment, Holly remembers feeling so “uncomfortable because I had gone past where my body needed to be, according to my definition”. This sensation of discomfort was extreme to such an extent that Holly had the corporal desire to “literally rip off my skin and just jump out of my body. It was that intense feeling” of “not wanting to be in my body”.

During moments like this, when disconnection momentarily arose, Holly recalls looking upon her body with disgust; in particular, she was filled with such detest for the look and feel of her stomach which, she thought, could not actually belong to her, as “This is not what it (my stomach) is supposed to look like”. The question of “Why is it looking like this?” haunted her during these times, as she was overwhelmed with feelings of detachment from her physical self. Holly admits that it took several years of swinging back and forth, “trying to find that happy balance between respecting my body, fueling it properly, not going under, not letting myself go too hungry, but also not eating for the sake of eating, and knowing that it’s actually ok to be hungry”. Holly feels now that she is in a state of balance, in which she has returned to the “middle ground where I am truly responsive to my body”.

### Controlling

Another element that arises often within Holly’s narrative is the notion of control. Her experiences of bodily disconnection may be significantly linked to her desire for control: to have something within her life that she is able to manage and accomplish. And now that Holly has transitioned towards a deeper relationship with her body, these thoughts still linger in her mind, as leftover programming from her past, so firmly engrained in her mind were they. As she relays, “When I’m feeling out of control with everyone else, what I do? Oh, I’ll try to control my body”. Even now, while enjoying the experience of bodily connection, Holly feels the

whisper of temptation to exert control over her body and her food intake, especially during times of stress. She likens an eating disorder to an alcohol addiction, stating that one is never truly recovered, and, thus admitting that she is still, and will always be, in recovery. It is as though her body is forever there, without fail, and, as such, it always has the potential to be controlled, via the vehicle of food intake and/or exercise. Although Holly may hear the voice of control speaking to her from time to time, she is now able to understand this urge as a reactionary measure to some source of stress in her life, and she is able to react to it in kinder, more gentle ways that do not make her body the innocent victim.

### Trusting

Although intuitively she felt that her body was now journeying in a positive, healthy direction, she found it difficult to trust the process. She recalls having to “constantly talk myself out of going back to the way things were”, finding comfort in the safety zones of nutrition and exercise that she had set in the past. Clearly, part of Holly’s transition towards bodily connection has involved developing an implicit sense of body trust that had previously been overpowered by her fear and desire for control. She had to begin trusting that her body would return to a place of natural satiation, an experience of neither starvation nor fullness, if she nurtured and nourished it well. In continuing along the path to bodily connection, Holly’s fear and need for control slowly dissolved, replaced by a feeling of trusting acceptance, as she learned “to be comfortable with hunger again in the sense that I didn’t have to be afraid of hunger, because I was going to allow myself to eat when I was hungry, so I didn’t have to be fearful of hunger”. Thus, body trust became the new foundation, where fear and control once stood.

### Accepting

Holly's present life journey is challenging her on such a statement, as at the time of our initial interview, she is in the midst of wedding preparations, and conflicting ideas swirl in her mind once again. She describes the re-emergence of the "voice" that is attempting to convince her that she should be "freaking out about my body right now", as society would advise that all brides should do. Holly wonders, with a twinkle in her eye, if she should "join a Bridal Boot Camp" or if she should be putting more of an effort into perfecting her body at this time. She continues with the litany of the "voice", wondering if she should "try to eat a little bit less over the next few weeks?" And then the firm, focused, body-empowered Holly re-awakens and re-affirms her body connection, emphatically bringing an end to her questions and silencing the programming that she was once so accustomed to hearing. She now, clearly, accepts her body as is, and she has no desire to change it. For Holly's journey, acceptance was a major stepping stone on the path towards bodily connection.

### Energizing

With this acceptance, a new wave of energy swept over Holly's life, as she began to feel an incredible sense of freedom, no longer being enslaved to "that voice", the fear, or the desire for control that once plagued her body and mind. No longer concealed within the cage of her own creation; she is an active player in the story of her life. In breaking free of the chains that once entangled her, Holly feels a fresh sense of focus and involvement in her life, as she suddenly has a pool of energy available to use. She has, thus, experienced an energetic shift, in moving from a deficit-based approach to her body, to a newfound focus on other aspects of her life. Space has opened within Holly, giving her the time and energy to think, breathe, and cultivate fresh interests. However, once again a certain level of fear did creep in, as a different



type of uncertainty arose as to what her future may be. She reveals that she had been “so used to being driven towards a certain goal that now it was like, now what do I do? Now where do my energies go?” Whereas her deficit-based fear was anxiety-ridden, this newly-cultivated fear was healthy and anticipatory of positive change in her life.

### Appreciating

Holly began to cultivate a blossoming appreciation of her body and its strengths. Through mindful attention to its desires and needs, respect for her body was starting to develop. She recalls that “Pushing my body, seeing what it could do, was extremely beneficial because I learned to appreciate it”. Holly was developing the ability to think about the functionality of her body, and the ability that it provided her. With this newly-unearthed understanding of her physical form, Holly reveals that, “It kind of got to the point where, you know, it just felt silly to be bashing my body, because I was like, look what it just did!” And thus began a new appreciation of its many strengths.

### Listening

In transitioning towards a state of unity between her mind and body, Holly has developed her own personal truths about the wholeness of the human experience. In a natural state, Holly believes that the mind and body are inherently connected. Yet, she believes that “The way that we live in this world, it’s easy for it to split”. During times of stress, for example, Holly viscerally feels a separation between her body and mind, as she becomes “like a floating head”. At moments like these, she “literally (does) not feel my body. I feel like I’m just from the neck up.” This is a shared experience in our society, Holly asserts, as many people are “living up in our heads” and “wait too long before we look at our aches and pains and our sicknesses. We don’t listen to our bodies early enough until it becomes some sort of negative physical

symptoms.”

During her own experiences of bodily detachment, Holly did not even want to feel the connection between body and mind, so desperate was she to change her body and to not be in her own skin. Now, however, that she has cultivated a new understanding of her body, she is more aware of its needs, and more receptive to its unspoken voice. When she feels a physical sensation, rather than blaming it on an illness or injury, she understands that her energy has been blocked somewhere, and that healing her pain is a matter of freeing this energy so that it can continue to flow freely between body and mind. Holly confesses that she “definitely wouldn’t have felt that mind-body connection years ago, because I didn’t want to be in my body. I didn’t want this body. Whereas now that I appreciate this body, (I) can feel the whole mind-body-spirit connection.” Holly feels that, in order to protect our mind-body unity, we must be intentional with it. We must create the time and space in which to foster that connection, “because it’s very easy to feel that split in this world”.

### Seeking

Our interview slowly shifts with the emergence of insights of a spiritual nature. Holly professes that, within the last year or two, “the spiritual element has started to come” in her life. In developing an appreciation of her body in its own balanced harmony, Holly is moving past her physical self to a state of existential questioning, and is presently “in that kind of more spiritual mode, trying to figure out what works for me”. Her bodily journey has begun to reveal to her the existence of an inner “why”, as she ponders how she would like her energies to be directed in this life, and what sort of purpose she has been created to fulfill. As such spiritual questions arise in her life, Holly feels at this time a sense of “losing the ego”, and releasing the egocentrism with which she once spent her days. She now situates herself within “the top layer”

of her evolution, in which her energy is engaged in matters of purpose and meaning. Holly feels that she is “here on this earth for some purpose, and I hope that my purpose is not that I spent the majority of my life being concerned about what my stomach looked like.” She expresses gratitude for her journey, saying “There’s a little part of me that very much appreciates the experience that I went through, because of the fact that it is, overall, actually, unfortunately, a very common experience, and it has led me to my work in the area (of nutrition) which, when we talk about the spiritual part, helped me to find my purpose”.

### Relating

She finds her own personal story an asset to her career, in working with clients for whom the “diet talk” or “fat talk voice” speaks loudly and clearly, as it once did to her. Holly appreciates the experiences that she has endured because she believes that they have made her a knowledgeable and empathic dietitian who is able to relate with her clients on a personal level. Because of her own massive shifts in cognition and awareness, Holly is able to perceive distorted thinking patterns – her own, and those of her clients— and to trace them back to their roots, knowing that such thoughts and behaviours are learned, rather than innate. In her own personal life, she recognizes that, whenever she hears the “fat talk voice”, she knows that this voice “is not necessarily me”, and that the influences for this voice stem from beyond, in the sociocultural realm where distorted messages are constantly being disseminated. Holly speculates that “I don’t know if you can truly understand that voice unless you’ve had that voice”. In working with her clients, she “totally hear(s) it”, and is thus better able to empathize with them, and better equipped to teach them how to discern the voice for themselves. In working with women, and in learning of our shared body experiences, she recognizes that “the voices are the same”, and “script is the same”, as our culture of body dissatisfaction, body anxiety, and body disconnection

speak through our own bodies and minds.

### Unifying

It has been through the understanding of something greater than the physical self that Holly has started to cultivate an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things in the world. She understands “how connected we all are and how we impact each other”. She feels that, through intentional silence and stillness, we are able to feel that sense of connection that unites not only body and mind, but all bodies and minds within the world. Mindfulness meditation and yoga ground her in this knowledge. As well, she professes that nature provides the ideal space for the cultivation of her spirituality. Through walking and running outdoors, Holly has started to feel her relative place in this world, as she has realized “that (we’re) just like this small little piece of this much bigger vast universe”. This expansive viewpoint is in contrast to the limited focus through which Holly once viewed the world.

### Growing

In the few months between our two interviews, new beginnings have started to grow in her life, in the form of two babies: she is now pregnant with twins. Holly and her now-husband are beyond ecstatic for these double blessings, and are anticipating their birth with love and excitement. This, it seems, is the ultimate test for Holly, as she had previously speculated what such a change might be like for her, now that she has transitioned towards a very strong connection with her body. How would her body respond to such change? And, perhaps more significantly, how would her mind react to her growing body?

Holly is discovering this now, and, as she reveals, she is loving the experience. She delightfully exclaims, “I love my tummy!”, showing a massive contrast to the Holly who had once loathed her stomach. As her body changes and grows, she identifies several ways in which

this experience is affecting her sense of bodily connection. Firstly, Holly shares that she is presently nurturing a deeper connection and appreciation of her body, as she is feeling life growing within. She now describes her body as being a temple of life, an understanding that she had not had before. As she watches her belly grow, she understands its purpose, as she is beginning to understand her own. She is “feeling confident about the weight gain because it is meant to be this way”, although she reports that she would not be so content with the gain if it was happening for a reason other than pregnancy.

In changing form, however, Holly reveals a second insight into the pregnancy experience: now, once again, it seems as though her body is on public display, just as it was in years previous, wherein people felt that they had the right to scrutinize and monitor her. Holly feels the same sort of surveillance rear its head again, as her body, in particular her expanding belly, “has become public domain”. People in her life are now highly focused on her stomach, yet in an interested manner, as opposed to the worried manner of yesterday. Her stomach seems to be a genuine object of intrigue, even from people that she does not know. She is taken aback by some of their ongoing, intrusive commentary. As Holly shares, “People have the liberty to say what they want” about her changing body, but she often feels like explaining to them that “Yes, my body is changing, but it is still MY body!” Not wanting to be the object of conversation, Holly has found herself “turning inward”, retreating from social entanglements, so she can be alone with her blossoming new experience. As she reveals, “I just want to be with me and this growing form.”

Pregnancy, while thus far being a wonderful experience for Holly, has caused her mind to, once again, become pre-occupied: as she reports, she is now focused on comparing her own baby bump to the bumps of other pregnant women around her. This social comparison has led

her to examine what is “normal” for pregnant women and to assess her own body accordingly. In comparing her own experience with that of her cousin, whose body did not show any signs of pregnancy until an advanced stage, Holly wonders why it is that her own body started to show much earlier in the process. Although this comparison is admittedly in her brain, Holly professes that she feels comfortable with it, and that it is more of a curiosity than a judgment against her own body. As an update, at the time in which Holly expressed this question during our second interview, she thought that she was having one baby. A few weeks later, however, it was discovered that she was carrying twins: hence the early showing. As Holly expresses, “What my body internally and physically goes through is going to be my own experience, and I can’t compare this to others. Other people’s stories do not serve me well.” This is evidence of true bodymind wisdom.

### Altering

During our initial interview, Holly’s love of running, and its role in helping her achieve bodily connection, was clear. She was mindful, however, of not placing too much importance on running, in case there came a day when she was no longer able to do so. Now has come the time where her running routine has been altered slightly, to accommodate this new growth within her. She recalls a recent experience in which she was not able to run as she would normally do, as “My body was like, no, I’m sorry!” At this time, her brain was wondering, “How come I can’t do this?” The “drill sergeant voice” that she had lived with for so long automatically piped up in her ear, shouting at her that “You’re only in your first trimester! Suck it up! If you don’t get out now, how do you expect to do this (later)?” Although jarring at first, Holly has realized that this is a “real exercise in listening to what my body is saying”, rather than the voice of the harsh critic. She has since cultivated an acceptance of different ways to move her body, such as slow

walking, that enable her to continue to give her body what it needs and loves – movement – while taking care of its developing needs. And, yet, some days she still feels well enough to run her normal routines, as demonstrated by her recent 23K run. As she reveals, “There is no absolute”. Rather than engaging an all or nothing approach, by either running flat out or not moving her body at all, she has adopted a new appreciation of the ebb and flow of her body, as she listens to her body’s voice and uses its energy wisely.

### Honouring

In all, Holly honours her pregnancy experience as a humbling time of evolution and growth. As her body blossoms, so too does her spirituality, as she accepts an understanding of birth as a very spiritual experience. Holly shares that pregnancy is helping her “evolve spiritually”, as she is becoming more connected to the power of life and the greatness of the birthing experience. She is also growing in body love and awareness, as she “constantly has my hands on my lower belly, hoping the bab(ies) feel my vibes”. In becoming pregnant, she has essentially relinquished control on her body once and for all, and she must now trust that her body, and those of her babies, know what they are doing. Holly is now flowing in the uncertainty, and the miraculous, as she simply allows things to unfold. The shared experience of life between herself and her babies, and the knowledge that she helped create this life with her husband, brings her to new spiritual heights, as she nurtures an understanding of her body as a temple in which her babies find their home. As she beautifully expresses, “I want my body to be a safe haven” for my babies, as she welcomes these new bodies into her own body experience.

Thank you, Holly, for sharing your meaningful story of choice, movement, and growth, and for adding a beautiful new chapter in the story of your body’s journey.

## Sarah's narrative

### Finding

The drive to Sarah's house is long and eventful; I miss the turn-off several times, and keep finding myself lost amidst the narrow, winding streets. However, as her community melts into the ocean, I am not overwrought about discovering myself adrift, loving the scenery in my search for her home. Walking into her house, finally, is like entering a new world, and I quickly understand why and how I had gotten lost in the first place. Sarah lives near, yet far; her home is secluded from the city, yet connected to an energy that is vibrant, pulsing, palpable, and slightly foreign. This is a beautiful analogy for Sarah, herself, as she is an individual who enjoys company, but also loves being alone, and she finds inspiration in the time spent by herself. Being a visual artist, the walls of Sarah's cozy abode are adorned with colourful paintings, each one with a separate heartbeat, detailing stories of sunshine, happiness, and positivity. Sarah is a woman of the tropics, and her creations align with that bright vision. Colours are alive, imagination is ignited, and energy is alighted within her home.

Sarah's adventures as an artist have recently flourished, and she spends most of her free time in the creative pursuit. She has a website on which her artwork is displayed, she has recently celebrated the opening of her first exhibit at a gallery, and her paintings and prints are sold at a local art store. In between her painting pursuits, she is also a teacher at a school in another community which hugs the sea. Thus, she is able to create a life by balancing her two passions: art and fitness, and while remaining near the ocean, which connects her to the tropics, the place where her heart and soul reside. Sarah's narrative unfolds with rawness, vulnerability, and anxiety, much like the sea during a raging storm, yet her strength, positivity, and gratitude carry her to the calm shore.



### Enjoying

Sarah has an awareness and mindfulness of her body that many of us can only dream about having. Connection, for her, has been a natural experience throughout her entire life. She professes that she has been “pretty connected with my body my whole life, through confidence and through sports and activities”. So strong was her bodily connection that she “was always in tune (with it). I could always pick out different ailments, if I wasn’t feeling well. I always felt like I had a little bit of a sixth sense type thing. I just always felt very in tune physically, emotionally, sexually, just everything.”

As a Physical Education teacher and a fitness enthusiast, Sarah had developed a very conscious awareness of her physicality, and she was dedicated to preserving its health and wellbeing, through healthful eating, regular exercise, and listening to its messages and cues. And yet, as she reveals, this connection was quickly and quietly derailed by an external force that crept upon her unexpectedly: breast cancer. Suddenly, the body that she had respected, appreciated, honoured, and loved became the external object that she no longer knew and was no longer able to understand.

### Betraying

While Sarah had been fit, happy, and positive in the time leading up to her diagnosis, the word “cancer” shook her world to its core. This was a definitive turning point for Sarah, as her once durable and reliable bodily connection shattered. Sarah compares the shock of this trauma to being “hit with a ton of bricks”, as she was caught completely unaware. She describes feeling an intense sense of betrayal from her body, as though “My body turned on me. I felt that my soul and my person was completely separated from my body. I didn’t really understand why my body would turn on me. Because I always maintained a very healthy lifestyle. I always took care of

myself. I always ate very well. I exercised. I listened to my body. It was a very important part of my being, and then to have it turn on me was very devastating. And it was also very upsetting because I didn't have any warning signs. It was just boom! You have cancer. There was no leading up to it. There was no symptoms. There was nothing. It was just there." She recalls feeling dread upon realizing that "You can't quit cancer" and that her story would now unfold within its parameters.

Once cancer had made its arrival in her life, bodily connection became a distant memory, an illusion of the life that she had once known and loved. During this period in her life, Sarah existed in a state of numbness and shock. She recalls that, "At the beginning of the diagnosis, emotionally, it was just shock." She remembers that "When I was first told (the news), I did not cry. I drove myself home from the appointment, which is not normal" for someone who has just been delivered such potentially devastating news. She was not able to comprehend the magnitude of the diagnosis, and she felt a sense of emotional paralysis as the news digested. While her emotions were stagnant at this time, her mind was alive with threads of thoughts that never seemed to lead her anywhere. Why had she gotten cancer? Where had it come from? Hadn't she been doing everything right? Why was her body suddenly turning on her like this? And, perhaps most devastatingly, how come her body, which she had so lovingly nurtured, didn't give her any warning signs? Such questions would continue to haunt her recovery, and, in fact, still stir within her mind to this day.

### Objectifying

It was a harsh blow for Sarah to realize that the loyal connection that she had so carefully and attentively created and nurtured with her body had not been strong enough to detect the threat of cancer. Her body had not let her know, which, in her eyes, was the ultimate act of

betrayal. She reports feeling “disappointed because, not only it turned on me, but because it didn’t tell me that I was sick”. Upon this betrayal, there happened a clear split between mind and body; the divide was so massive that Sarah confesses that she “felt that it (mind and body) was two separate entities, as opposed to everything working in unison”. As she reports, “My body was still there, and my emotions, and my spirit, and my soul . . . but they weren’t in unison. They weren’t working together. They were working against each other.”

As this detachment escalated, Sarah describes her body as being “just kind of a thing. It wasn’t my body.” Her behaviour was driven by the obligation to give this “object” what it needed. She remembers being focused on such objectifying thoughts as “My body needs these types of foods. My body does not need sugar. My body does not need fat. My body does need exercise. My body does not need to have stress. My body does not need to have anxiety.” Everything that she did stemmed out of an obligation towards her body, rather than any sort of love or care. In particular, Sarah felt extremely detached from her breasts, the site of the cancer. She reveals that “My breasts didn’t feel like part of my body. They were just there. I had no desire to touch them. They didn’t feel human. It was just like a separate thing. More so the one with the cancer, but the other side as well. I just stopped viewing them as even attached to my body.”

She discusses spending “a large part of that summer with my top off, going through the radiation treatments” and feeling “no privacy with (my) body. (My) body was just kind of there. It was something for the doctors to fix.” She was fortunate enough to have been placed in the care of a renowned surgeon, who was able to minimize scarring on her chest. Sarah reports, although they may not be clearly visible, “The scars are there” and that she can tell the difference between her breasts pre-and-post surgery. To her, the scars will always be there, as

corporal memory of her journey.

Although the body was affected physically by the surgery, so, too, was it impacted sexually. As a result of scarring, as miniscule as it may be, Sarah reports that her “sexuality has changed a little bit” and that “I didn’t really look at my body as overly sexual during that time. It just made me sad that I was a little bit different. My breasts felt very different on one side, the cancer side, because the radiation (made them) very hard, and I had radiation burns. So it was just a constant reminder. Especially having one breast normal again, it was hard looking at it physically and tending to it physically.”

For one who had previously enjoyed a strong connection with her sexual self, the aftereffects were devastating, and further increased the disconnect between Sarah and her sense of self. Thus, Sarah’s bodily experience shifted from an internal perspective of being within her body, feeling its messages and listening to its cues, to being completely detached from her body, viewing it with the external gaze of an outsider, and seeing it as something that needed to be fixed. Sarah discloses feeling a sense of sadness upon looking at her body during this summer, “because I wasn’t the same anymore” and she did not recognize her body at all.

### Repressing

While the initial stage of her cancer journey was filled with numbness and shock, the treatment stage brought with it confusing feelings that she preferred to conceal. Sarah admits to not having adequately dealt with the emotional component of her cancer, believing that she neglected her emotions at this very vulnerable time. As she reveals, “I never really tapped into emotion. I guess I never really took care of my emotional needs.” She only permitted herself to cry once, a few hours after being diagnosed, during an expressive outburst in which the “tears were just coming, and I couldn’t control them”. However, after two hours of crying, the

emotional flow suddenly halted, and “Then there was no more tears, there was no more upset, there was no more hard emotion. It was just kind of like, ‘Ok, let’s get this done, and let’s get this taken care of.’” This solid approach may have prevented Sarah from deeply connecting with her emotions on the level at which healing may potentially take place, as she stopped the gush of tears by constructing an intangible block, rather than permitting the well to run dry.

As her emotions were not adequately acknowledged or expressed, Sarah believes that they began to manifest themselves through an “underlying current of anxiety” which began to infiltrate her life. At the time of diagnosis, Sarah had been experiencing stress from multiple sources unrelated to her health. As she shares, “There was a lot of other anxiety going on besides all this”. She and her partner, who had been living happily together in the south for the past several years, had decided months previous to this, prior to the cancer, that they were going to move home to Newfoundland. Thus, they were facing the stress that arises from packing their belongings, finding renters for their current property, finding jobs and a house in their new community, and doing whatever other task that moving countries entails.

On top of this, while teaching full-time at a junior high school, Sarah was in the final stages of finishing her thesis for her Masters of Education degree. Furthermore, she and her partner had gotten married just a few days prior to the cancer diagnosis, and had just endured months of planning a wedding, and all the pressure that that may provoke. And, the icing on the cake was that her husband had recently been offered a new position in Newfoundland, and had to move earlier than expected, leaving Sarah alone to finish her treatment. Sarah reveals that she “did everything on my own”, including recover from her treatments, and come to terms with the new imposition in her already hectic life.

### Controlling

Yet she managed to do it all, in a highly controlled, constrained manner, while concealing her emotions, denying her illness, and working hard to keep her anxiety a private affair. As Sarah reveals, “I felt constrained a little bit throughout the journey. Because, you know, I would scream inside of my head when I was having a conversation, but I would never scream out loud. I would never allow myself to have that pure emotional release. I would never freak out. I would never throw a tantrum or have a huge fight with my husband. I was very controlled with everything. And even when I was going through the severe anxiety part of it, no one ever knew. Nobody ever knew that I was anxiety-ridden. I would even keep that hidden.” She also tried very diligently to minimize her experiences, in order to avoid burdening anybody with her needs. Sarah surmises that, “It’s easier to plug along through life and just be happy and surface-y, as opposed to having an emotional conversation all the time. No one wanted to deal with it. So I just avoided it.”

### Denying

Avoidance and minimization wore several disguises, and were prevalent in her relationships at that time. In an attempt to maintain some sort of social normality, Sarah aimed to “minimalize the therapy as much as I could” when with her friends, although they were all aware of what she was going through. She recalls planning her treatment times around lunch dates with friends, so that she “wasn’t just leaving the house to go for my radiation. I was leaving the house to go on a lunch date with a friend and I would just have to stop by the radiation clinic for a few minutes”. She flippantly exclaims, “Popping off! I’m just going to pop off here and now and have some radiation. I’ll be a little late.” Then, when having lunch with her friends and trying to sustain regular conversation, Sarah acknowledges that, “They would be talking, and in my head

I'd be screaming, 'Oh my God, I have cancer!'" Although her friends all knew about her illness, she admits that "it was really difficult to talk (to them) about (it), because they just didn't understand."

At this time, Sarah felt a shift in her sense of normality, as she began to think of herself as an "outcast". She began to view herself "as very different from everyone else", having the impression that she was the "member of a really crappy club", and that "You don't really know what it's like unless you're part of the club. No one can relate and no one can really understand unless they (have gone) through it as well." Even with people who had experienced cancer themselves, Sarah did not feel any sort of release or relief. She recalls not wanting "to be part of a support group, because I didn't want to hear about anyone else's stories". Her one experience visiting an online support forum left her feeling "even worse", as she did not feel as if her experiences were as "horrifying" as anybody else's. And so, she struggled in isolation, admitting that, "I didn't want to talk about it, because if I started to talk about it, then it would be real. And denial was a large part of what got me through everything."

Sarah even kept her struggles from her family, wanting to alleviate their concern. She recalls lying to her mother, not wanting to "say the c-word", for fear of worrying her. To this day, she has still not had a full conversation with her parents about her illness. With her siblings, Sarah she was slightly more forthcoming. When one of her sisters reacted to the news with an emotional outburst, Sarah retreat even further from her family, claiming that "I couldn't deal with that emotion". Another sister received the news in a very clinical manner, going into "doctor mode", by researching and giving statistics to Sarah about breast cancer. This, to Sarah, was a much preferred mode of reaction as it did not involve any sort of emotional energy. Another vapid reaction came from her brother, as he responded to her news with a simple "Oh,

cool”. It appears as though each of her siblings offered a very different form of response, and yet neither seemed to offer the consolation or support that she wanted and/or needed.

In the course of our interview, Sarah repeats an expression multiple times that may reveal a dormant longing for the support that she did not receive: “No one talked about it. No one talked about it.” She recognizes that such a lack of support was not unwarranted, noting that it was she who had resisted any emotional exchange with her family and friends. Sarah understands that everyone “more or less followed my lead, because I didn’t really talk about it, so they didn’t talk about it. So everyone just kind of carried on and pretended that everything was ok.” In retrospect, Sarah confesses that “it kind of upset me, but at the same time I didn’t want anyone to talk about it. So I didn’t know what I wanted, really. I didn’t know what I needed. Because I would never really engage in the conversation. I didn’t want to dive into a huge amount of emotion. If anybody asked, I’d be like, ‘Oh, I’m totally ok’, and then I would change the conversation. But I always felt like an outcast. I didn’t want anyone to know. I kept very private about it. But at the same time, I would be screaming inside of my head.”

### Retreating

Rather than “burdening others with her emotional needs” at this time, Sarah decided to focus her energy inwards, disclosing that she “spent a lot of time internalizing, and just trying to come to grips” with what was happening. She professes that “There was a lot of soul-searching on my part, just trying to internalize and trying to listen to my own emotions, and just trying to figure things out on my own”. This desire to work through her challenges internally illustrates that the bodily connection that she had once lovingly nurtured was still actually there, albeit wavering and fluid, hidden beneath the cancer experience, waiting for her attention once again.



Such soul-searching proved productive and necessary for Sarah, as her journeying body slowly began to shift in a new direction. As Sarah was making sense of her experiences, she was gradually re-cultivating the relationship that she had once so enjoyed. She acknowledges that “Time is a huge healer. Even if you’re not actively trying to make changes and, you know, you’re not meditating every day and you’re not seeing a therapist every day, time just kind of passes and makes things a little bit easier.” As the months flowed onwards, so too did Sarah, gradually, in the direction of re-connection.

### Calming

She reminisces that the transition within her body towards connection began to occur after she had reached the two-year mark of her initial diagnosis, stating that “Once that turning point hit, things changed”. She explains why “the first two years was always a worry” for her, revealing that “When you hear stories of people who have cancer and who, when it comes back, it’s always in those first two years; that’s when it comes back”. Thus, although the time leading up to this mark was filled with extreme anxiety and fear, once this milestone had passed, Sarah began to tread softly on a new journey, one leading back to her sense of bodily connection. She began to notice a “calmness” settle upon her, gently and gradually, as “My body just started to relax, and I wasn’t focused on it anymore. And I just felt back to normal again. The underlying anxiety and the underlying stress, and the underlying disappointment with my body taking that path and turning on me, just faded away. And the significance of it all diminished a little bit.” She recalls that “once the results came back, a weight completely lifted. I can’t describe it in any other way. It was just a weight lifted, and I guess from that moment on, I can breathe again, and I can just carry on, and I can start living again”.

In addition to the passing of time, Sarah credits her change in pace and environment for adding to this newly evolving sense of calmness. The beginning of her bodily disconnection had arrived at a time in her life in which she was unsettled, literally and spatially. Bodily connection slowly re-emerged as Sarah began to settle into a different experience of calmness and quiet. In moving back to her home community, she recognizes that “It was probably a comfort of being a little bit more settled, and the comfort of having family around” that added to the feeling of groundedness that was stirring within. Thus, in connecting with others whom she knew and loved, in a place that was comforting and familiar, Sarah was beginning to connect with herself again.

#### Becoming aware

Such was the beginning of her journey towards re-connecting with her fragile, yet resilient, body, and re-forging the union between mind, body, and spirit. She describes her movement towards connection as “an everyday evolution, as opposed to an exact turning point. It was kind of an everyday thing, and it was an everyday building of the relationship back”. Sarah identifies that “it’s not something that you just sit down and overnight you say, ‘Ok, tonight I’m going to reconnect with my body’, because that’s not how it worked. It was a process and it just happened without my knowledge. It was a kind of building.” It was this kind of building that involved listening to her body once again, understanding its implicit communication, and responding attentively to its desires and needs. As Sarah began to traverse this new path, she recalls that she “exercised a lot (at this time). I wasn’t crazy, but I was very aware of the fact that I needed to exercise. And even when I was running and I was getting tired, I would tell myself my body needs this in order to fight it. It was like a little motivator, I guess.”

Sarah also began to notice a shifting in her perspective at this time. While, over the previous two years, her mind had been focused on her body and its challenges, Sarah started to observe the focus of her thoughts progressively changing. As she relays, “I just stopped thinking about it. It wasn’t a constant on my mind. The screaming inside my head stopped. I just started feeling normal again. I just started to get back.” Sarah reveals that this was a time in which her understanding of her body started to change, from that of a betrayer, to that of a body who had simply experienced an illness and who had lived to tell the tale. The cancer was no longer the defining moment of her story, just one of the sub-chapters.

### Unifying

As Sarah was transitioning towards this new relationship with her body, a feeling of unity started to emerge. Wholeness, she declares, is an integral part of her being, and a goal to which she is always striving: in mind, body, and spirit. Sarah believes that “In order to fully grow as a person, you need to be growing in all three aspects. You can’t just focus on one piece. Everything has to work in unison”. Admittedly, Sarah did not fully understand the power of this unity in her life before cancer, confessing that “I didn’t realize that such a relationship existed” before she was forced to confront it. Her cancer experience was thus a catalyst for the creation of and awareness of this wholeness in her life. Through her body’s experiences, Sarah is able to appreciate what it feels like to be whole – mentally, physically, sexually, emotionally, socially, and spiritually—and how quickly one may become divided. She professes that, even if she was not able to label it as such before, unity between mind, body, and spirit “was a very important aspect of who I was, and having that taken away from me was very devastating”. As she reveals, “It wasn’t until I found the connect again that I was able to feel whole again”.

Sarah has now reached a place of “feeling back to myself, feeling that my whole person (is) once again, my mind, body, and soul, as opposed to completely having my body separate.” She recognizes that “the questioning” is still there, as she ponders the meaning behind her challenges. And, she describes that, while the anxiety has mostly left, it re-appears each year around the time of her annual physical exam, for fear of the cancer having returned. Yet, the acceptance of her experiences is apparent as she affirms that while “all of that is still there, of course, I feel connected again.”

### Learning

Sarah becomes reflective and particularly vulnerable when discussing the meaning of her body’s experiences, and the impact that she feels such a journey has had on her life. The rawness in her voice brings to mind the image of an open wound, once covered with a Band-Aid and seemingly forgotten, being exposed to air once again. Her words reveal a depth of unexpressed emotion and fragility, balanced with a sense of sadness and regret, as she tells the story of a body that is left to pick up the pieces that cancer so carelessly scattered. Stating that “I wish it didn’t happen”, Sarah professes that “I would like to think that going through the disconnect made the connection stronger, and made that relationship (with my body) stronger, but I don’t think it did. I don’t view it as a positive experience. I don’t view having gone through the disconnect and then the connect as a positive experience. It was positive, but it wasn’t an essential part of my growth”. Sorrow and pain are evident as Sarah declares that “I would’ve been much happier staying connected the entire time. I feel (that) because I went through the disconnect, my journey was broken a little bit, and I was cheated a little bit. I was cheated that I had to go through that, and that I lost two year of a valuable relationship. Yeah, the adage that ‘If it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger’ . . . but I don’t feel that it has made me stronger”.

Although time has passed and she has been able to re-develop a certain type of connection with her body, Sarah has not yet fully re-connected with herself to the extent that she once was. That is, the connection she now feels is significant, yet not as strong as the one that she had lovingly and carefully nurtured prior to her cancer experience. She has not yet been able to fully heal the journey that cancer so recklessly broke. As these are still early days for her, just a few years after healing from her illness, it is not unexpected that such a rawness and freshness still exists. This presents a new way of knowing of the body's journeys: that bodily re-connection is not always the same as bodily connection, and that some experiences of body disconnection take longer to heal than others.

Despite her sombre words, however, a glimmer of light does appear in Sarah's narrative. Although adamant that her experiences were "unnecessary, unwarranted, and unjustified", she recognizes that learning has taken place in her life as a result of her challenges. While strongly feeling that cancer was not a necessary part of her growth process, another part of her admits that, "At the same time, I did need it". The experience, to her, was a "huge growth piece" that forced her to evolve at what she perceives as an accelerated rate. She acknowledges that "Emotionally and mature-wise, I guess having gone through that, I can learn from it and grow". Yet, despite this insight, Sarah is unwavering in her assertion that, "I can't say that I'm glad that I went through it. It didn't make me a better person because I went through it. I just sucked that I went through it, and I got through it."

### Seeking

In exploring purpose and meaning, the interview shifts as Sarah ponders the spiritual meaning of her experiences and asks, more so to herself than anyone else, "Why me? Why did this happen to me?" She recognizes the nature of cancer: that it is not an even playing field, and

that there is no reason or rhyme behind its presence or power. As she identifies, “There’s so many different layers to it. On the one hand, it’s a disease. And, you know, obviously, I was cured of it and it went away. And there’s people that get the exact same disease that die. So it’s a highly emotional thing to deal with”. She attempts to answer her question with yet another inquiry: “But at the same time, I’m fine, so why not me? I mean, why am I ok, and why is someone else suffering so much more?” Sarah is clearly in an existential period: this newly sprouting awareness is one of the by-products of her experience. As she expresses, “These are questions that I don’t think anyone can answer, and I don’t think anyone will ever answer, because there is no solution to it. There’s just nothing. Because I did everything right my whole (life). I took care of my body. I did everything I was supposed to. But, it happened. So that’s where the disconnect started. You know . . . why me?” A silence falls as that question lingers in the space, unable to be answered.

That Sarah is on a journey of exploration and inquiry is evident. Awareness of herself and the world emerges with every word. She is on a quest to understand, and this quest is bringing her face-to-face with a burgeoning spiritual presence in her life. Sarah openly identifies the power of such in her journey, revealing that it was her sense of spirituality that “kept me moving forward and reflecting on the positive in my life”. She emphasizes her understanding of spirituality as the awareness of universal energy, rather than any formalized institution. Sarah appreciates that, at every part of her journey, “the universe was lining up to take care of me”. Being a believer in the power of energy and fate, Sarah strongly trusts that “insignificant events of the universe led to me being alive”. Sarah explains that details in her life -- minor at the time, yet massive in retrospect -- became the saving graces which enabled her to return to her state of wellbeing. She tells the story of the universe also delivering her into the hands of a “brilliant”

surgeon, one of the best in the region. She also describes her graces with American health care, revealing that she, unexpectedly, had enough insurance to last right through her expensive surgery and treatments, saving herself incredible expense. Although she had initially presumed that her insurance would have been cut at the end of the school year, which ended just a few days prior to her diagnosis, it actually lasted until August 31<sup>st</sup>, the same day that she finished treatment. Sarah does not see the mere coincidence in this series of fortunate happenings; she sees something greater. Through these small tastes of synchronicity, she affirms that “the universe is doing everything to keep me alive and to be exactly where I need to be” and that she thus has “to keep my eyes open, be thankful, and not get caught up in the negative”. Such awareness and gratitude are another by-product of her transition experience.

### Glowing

As an artist, Sarah uses her emotions as her muse, painting that which she feels. She professes that “Painting, for me, is such an emotional experience” and that uses her artwork as “an expression of myself and my emotions and where I am at that particular time”. As Sarah attempted to keep her emotions hidden during her cancer experience, she encountered not only a lack of emotional release, but also a void of creative energy. Her stifled emotions provided an energetic block that was difficult to overcome. Thereby, she admits that she did not paint for the two years of her bodily disconnect, feeling as though she was living on the other side of a “wall” that prevented her from tapping into her creative source. She recalls perceiving her life at this time in dull colours, saying that “Even though my emotions were still there, and my body was there, everything was just grey and neutral and white. There was nothing glowing; there was nothing bright or vibrant about it”.

Having surmounted the barrier of her disconnect has released happiness and vibrancy into her life, and art, once again. Sarah reveals now that she feels as though she is in “joyous relationship” with her body, basking in her feeling that “Internally I am, and underlyingly I am in a positive and happy place”. To illustrate her joy, Sarah envisions an image of “a figure, dancing with rays of light”. As she verbally paints this artistic representation of her journey, Sarah’s desire for isolation and introspection emerges, as she proposes that, in her vision, there is “no one else around. There’s no one else in the image. It’s just myself. I’m all by myself and I’m ok and I’m very happy and I’m very content. I don’t need anyone else in the relationship to define that positive energy”. Sarah thus still holds the threads of privacy that were so prevalent along her journey, as she would like her journey to remain hers alone. The dichotomy remains, between alone/together, isolation/connection, internalization/external support, much as it has along her journey.

She proposes that, if she were ever to visually depict her journey, she would want to share her piece with everyone, and put it on public display, but she would want to keep its story private. Sarah would simple want people “to see the end result. I don’t want them to know the whole cancer piece behind it, or my personal struggle, or anything like that. I just want them to see the positive end result”. As she muses, “I would display it in a place for everyone to see, but I wouldn’t broadcast that it was there. I wouldn’t draw attention to it. I would want it to be there, and if people want to look at it and admire it, I want them to do it on their own accord. I don’t want to force anyone to come and look. I just want it to be”. This is very much an analogy of the way in which Sarah desires to live: seeking connection, yet wanting it to be natural and not forced or obliged; and being true to herself, yet not wanting to be scrutinized in any way.



The potentiality of such an art project brings vivacity to Sarah's eyes, as she muses that her creation "would be a natural thing", mirroring the natural flow of her bodily connection. She reveals a desire "to take some paint and a canvas and just mess it all up, and just feel the freedom. Just feel the freedom. You know, even close my eyes and just paint with my eyes closed, because I just want to feel from within, and I don't want any physical constraints. I don't want anyone else offering their opinions, or being anywhere around me. I just want the freedom." She would seek "the largest canvas that you can possibly find, like forty feet tall. I don't even want to be constrained by size. I would just throw stuff. It would be all me, all huge".

### Honouring

Sarah continues her vivid, energetic description by offering forth a colourful image with "no boundaries, nothing structured, nothing uniform, just pure freedom, without any ridicule from any external voice". She notes that, as she is "very organic", she doesn't "even want the constraint of using a brush. I want to feel at one with the creation, so I would just use my own hands. I wouldn't even want any type of implement." As she is illustrating her potential creation in such vibrant language, several words ignite like dynamite: Wild. Freedom. Private. Unconstrained. Pure. From within. Organic. Natural. At one. These are all words that beautifully describe the journey that Sarah has made with her body, spirit, and mind, across the divide, towards a newly-emerging understanding of bodily connection.

Thank you, Sarah, for sharing your story of rediscovering the beautiful innate connection with your body. You are an inspiration, artistically, physically, and as a strong, empowered friend.

## Renee's narrative

### Welcoming

Renee is a socially-aware individual who is ignited by her passion for justice and a desire to make the world a safe place in which women and girls can thrive. Known for her raw, assertive energy and her unapologetic dedication to feminism, she embodies the attributes of an empowered woman: passionate, vibrant, energetic, compassionate, caring, and driven. As a welder, Renee is employed in a male-dominated world in which she constantly feels like she has to keep on her toes, and in which she is always mindful of keeping her emotions in check. Her work in such a demanding field is admirable, and speaks to her dedication to female power. Clearly, Renee does not only talk the talk; she exudes empowerment in her words, actions, and day to day living. In addition, Renee is a trained Wendo self-defence instructor, and she provides facilitation for women and girls within our city. I have witnessed Renee as an instructor twice before, and both times have left me in awe of her passion, strength, aggression, and determination to make females feel in charge of their bodies and minds. Her story is one of passion and strength, and yet her softer side, just like ashes after a raging fire, is equally revealed, as Renee reveals her journey towards calm, safety, introspection, and peace, through cultivating connection with her body and mind.

### Emerging

Renee begins her narrative by expressing that she has “never been to a place where I felt connected to my body, but it has always been my goal”. As she professes, “Never have I felt that connection with my body. And I feel like I do have a very natural way of disconnecting with my body, that I’m trying to work on.” She admits that “there’s something about my body that I feel . . . it’s like I try to treat it like the best, but I’m not feeling like it’s mine. I don’t know how

to connect to it.” As she speaks, her words reveal that, even if she does not quite see it as such at this time, her transition towards bodily connection has already begun. Something within her has been gently pushing her in this direction for quite some time, without conscious awareness. As the interview progresses, this knowledge begins to unearth new ways of understanding for Renee, as her cognitive mind catches up to what her body already implicitly knows.

Affirming that “I’ve always been really careful to treat (my body) like it’s valuable to me”, Renee describes how she has adopted a straight-edge approach, meaning that she does not drink, smoke, nor do drugs. This approach, she explains, has little to do with ethics or morals, and plenty to do with the idea of causing harm to her body, professing that “I felt really nervous to poison my body, just because I saw so many people in my life doing it”. Renee, who openly admits to experiencing anxiety and depression, admits that this clean approach to her body has always been directly related to her desire for positive mental health. Physical and mental wellbeing are positively linked for Renee, and, in nurturing one, she helps balance the other. This is a meaningful understanding of bodily connection that extends beyond the physical realm to influence the other pieces of the whole.

### Detaching

As Renee explains, she often feels detached from her physical experience due to a current of anxiety that buzzes through her body. Renee recounts several instances in which she has attempted to bridge the divide with her body, by trying to connect with it through mindfulness practice and grounding activities, yet the anxiety consistently overwhelms her and derails her pursuit. The first time that Renee engaged in a grounding session with a counsellor, for example, her body trembled and shook intensely, bringing with it waves of emotion. She was not able to stabilize her anxiety in order to focus on her body’s sensations. Renee details a

similar second experience, in which she attended a ten day silent retreat, motivated by her desire to manage her depression and anxiety. Despite her strongest intentions, Renee found the retreat to be painful, physically, revealing that “ My body felt so bizarre. I could not connect with it. I just cried. I cried for five days. I felt like I lost my mind. I had so much anxiety.” Here is an individual for whom the mind and body are so obviously in-sync that imbalance in one causes the other to tip.

### Being

Further chasing connection between the body and mind, Renee proposes that she has always treated her body in “extremes”, choosing to engage her body in physical activities that invigorated her aggression and adrenaline. As a member of the punk and hard-core subculture for the past twenty years, Renee has often been involved in activities of a relatively violent nature. She remembers going to punk concerts when she was younger, where she would “mosh with all these guys, and I would get the shit kicked out of me, and love it!” Thriving on this energy, she would come home with “black eyes, and my family would be like, ‘What the fuck is going on?’ and I’d be like, “Yo, it’s punk, whatever!””

As she discusses the past uninhibited experiences of her body, Renee arrives at “a really interesting realization that I have about my body. I’ve always, and I just never thought about this, I used humour in being really crass and having no boundaries with my body.” Renee recalls that, at a party in the year 2000, she openly showed her vagina to party-goers, showing her stitches after having a vaginal cyst. She also details how, several years later, she was the singer for a feminist band called Discunt, whose album cover was a naked picture of her making “keeper art” with menstrual blood. Renee identifies that she “recklessly put my body out there” and that it was “totally hilarious and totally political and totally feminist”. She accepts that she has “zero

boundaries with who sees my body and how I put it out there”, proclaiming that she “doesn’t have those reservations”. While her body-positive behaviour “probably made people feel uncomfortable” in the past, she affirms that she would be eager to do the same now, in the presence of consenting adults.

From what she has disclosed thus far, it seems that her body is both a vehicle for her boundless energy and a canvas for her body-positive beliefs. There is a dichotomy to Renee’s words, as she paints the picture of her body’s past. While, on the one hand, she was cautious as to what she was putting into her body, on the other hand, she was open to any sort of physical or visual experience with her body, the more thrilling the better. The thoughts that motivated her exhibitionist behaviour at this time were “Fuck it, anyone can see it, because I don’t really care, because I think this is funny!” Similarly, she reveals that her penchant for aggressive activities was “a really fun thing to do, to be honest, with the adrenaline, and the anger, you know, an excellent way to deal with that”. Yet she also recognizes that this easygoing behaviour could have either potentially masked a growing feeling of disconnection in her body, or could actually have been one of the root causes of this disconnect. Whatever the case, Renee acknowledges that, by engaging in these types of physical pursuits, she was actively “trying to get some type of feeling” in her body.

### Dissociating

When Renee contemplates the other forms of disconnection in her life, two important elements spring to mind: her relationship with sex and food. Renee discloses that “The number one thing that I have been noticing in the past four or five years is a disconnect with sex”. She attributes this to remnants of her upbringing, as she “was raised Roman Catholic by a really strict, religious grandmother”, and was taught to view sex through the perspective of shame. It is

this feeling that she carries with her to this day, as sex invokes within her anxiety that steadily grows. Renee tends to dissociate during sex, bringing herself totally out of the physical experience. She reveals that she is “not able to be in the moment”, and that she ends up getting anxiety about the inevitable anxiety, detaching her even further from the moment.

Renee has been attempting to understand this dissociation, and to be proactive in her approach. She discloses that, “With the sex thing, I try very hard to communicate with my current partner about what I need and all that stuff, but it hasn’t gone very far, because they’re not receptive. So with the work that I’m trying to do with sex, I don’t feel very productive with it because I have such an anxiety about it now.” She also reveals that, while she once loved to masturbate, and used to do so regularly, anxiety prevents her from even being intimate with herself. As she describes, “When I go there, even with myself, my body has so much anxiety, and I think of really fucked-up shit to get away from my body. And that’s actually new, in the past few years. I’ll think of things where I’m like, Oh my God, how can I think of something so scary right now? I’m trying to be kind to my body, and feel pleasure in my body, and I stop. And it’s a really new thing. So I feel like I may have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it’s affecting me with sex.” Throughout the course of the interview, Renee mentions PTSD several times, and I will soon come to understand where this self-diagnosis was born, and why, and how it continues to infiltrate her present life.

Upon reflecting on the potential roots of her sexual disconnection, Renee proposes a very probable theory: in working so closely with women who have experienced sexual violence, through her work at rape crisis centres, Renee feels that she has internalized their graphic stories, and has made them her own. In addition, around the same time that she started doing this type of work, she was sexually assaulted by a friend. She pinpoints the beginning of her sexual

disconnection to this time in which she was both the victim of assault as well as the keeper of stories of other victims. Renee clarifies, however, that she does not believe her sexual disconnection is the result of any once incident, forming perhaps as a by-product of intersecting pieces of her life's story.

### Numbing

Renee highlights food as being another cause of her bodily disconnection. She admits that “Food has always been a funny thing” with her. While she enjoys eating, often to the extremes, she had never realized that what she presumed was normal eating behaviour was actually beyond the norm. She does, however, remember her body bearing the weight of shame at various times. As a child, Renee recalls “always being told I was chubby, and really shamed for my body by my family”. She paints the picture of a girl who “would eat in the bathroom” and feel “really embarrassed to eat in front of (her parents)”. However, eat she would do, often until she felt physically ill.

Disordered eating patterns have followed her into adulthood, wherein Renee shares that she has cultivated a pattern of over-eating to the point of complete fullness, at which point she is certain of physically feeling her body. Renee demonstrates her tendency to over-indulge by exclaiming, “I’m partying so hard, I’m eating twelve donuts! Like making it a joke for myself. Like, fuck dieting!” She conveys that “it’s only in the past two years do I not eat until I’m sick, because I’m like, ‘Whoa, that’s actually not normal!’ But I really would (eat so much). And I would be proud of it, in this really funny way”. The downside to this approach is what happens to her after indulging: she feels severe pain in her stomach regularly, and she gets tired, sluggish, and depressed after consuming too much sugar. Thus, her body directly and loudly speaks to her, letting her know exactly what it needs and likes, and protesting its dislikes vehemently.

Food, for Renee, has often played a role other than that of nutrition. She understands that, while she has been able to stay clear of the effects of alcohol and drugs through her straight-edge lifestyle, she may “use food as a way of numbing myself”. She confesses that “I never would have said that before. I just always said, ‘I just love eating’, and I don’t like dieting. But I really do feel now it’s a way of having a feeling that’s really predictable”. This statement echoes her earlier confession that engaging in aggressive activities may actually be motivated by her desire to *feel* something within her body.

### Surviving

The search for feeling something within her body, whether through food or aggression, is an important part of her life history. Her body has become familiar with living a life of shock and extremes, stemming from separate incidences of physical and psychological trauma. Renee reveals that, for much of her life, she has been living in “survival mode”, a state of being in which her body is always prepared for attack. As she describes, “I have lived my life in such shock”, bouncing from one shock-inducing episode to the next, without receiving the proper support to deal with her traumatic experiences.

Renee begins to reveal the story of a traumatic event that “fucked me up really hardcore”. As a student in Montreal a few years ago, Renee recalls a night in which a stranger came into her bedroom, with the intent to rape her. Earlier that evening, she remembers having a corporal feeling that something was going to happen. Trusting her “really incredible intuition”, Renee wrote in her journal that she had a “bad feeling about tonight” and that she felt “like someone is going to come in here”. Listening to her body’s voice, Renee made a vow to sleep with a hammer as a means of protection. It is clear to see that Renee harbours a strong primitive urge connecting her gut instinct and her thoughts. With complete body trust, Renee slept “with a



hammer for the first time that night”, and, as she reports, “ He came into my fucking bedroom at 3am. He came in, and I was naked, and I picked up my hammer, and I was like, ‘Get out! Get out!’” When the man did not leave her apartment, her survival mode kicked in, and she started screaming for help. Her pleas landed on deaf ears, however, in a neighbourhood in which she did not know anybody, leaving her to procure her own safety. Realizing such a lack of support, Renee reveals that “My heart totally broke”. Eventually, after much yelling and swinging of the hammer, Renee convinced the man to leave her house, and she soon after exploded in tears. To those in whom she later confided her story, she was advised that perhaps this man had been lost, or perhaps “He was just crazy”. It enrages Renee to this day that people were unable to express the truth: that he had come into her apartment to rape her. He did not steal anything, and, as she later discovered, he had been seen scoping out the neighbourhood in the days leading up to the potential attack. Renee is certain of his motive, and it infuriates her to see that other people were trying to make an excuse for his behaviour. This is one of the experiences that cemented in Renee a desire to bring protection and safety to women who need it.

This incident is one in a list of several which have shaken Renee to the core. She reports that she has “been in other situations, too, that were really traumatizing”, including being stabbed in the head with a beer bottle, and being attacked by a ninety-year-old woman with a cane. Likewise, in being a female in a male-dominated industry, Renee has been on the receiving end of sexual harassment at both school and work, and this has added to her sense of trauma. She also briefly discloses a sexual incident that she experienced years ago, which happened without her consent, and because of which she has lost ties with several of her close friends. Renee similarly alludes to the trauma that she has experienced with her family and her mom, in

particular, who lives with schizophrenia. Another shock that Renee experienced often was that of being poor and not knowing “where my next food was coming from”. In fact, as Renee now describes proudly, this is the first time in her life that she has been able to buy groceries regularly.

Through her stories, it is easy to ascertain why and how Renee feels that she experiences post-traumatic stress, and what damage these shock-inducing incidences have had on her connection with her body. She has experienced such shock to her system, mentally and physically, that her body may constantly be on alert. As Renee describes it, “I feel an accumulation of all these things, unresolved. I feel like it’s catching up to me”. This feeling is becoming even more pronounced the more connected Renee becomes to her physical self, as she is now able to feel the shock buried deep within her body, with heightened awareness.

#### Re-framing

While still struggling with the aftereffects of such trauma, Renee chooses to frame her struggles in an optimistic light, detailing the coping mechanisms that she has consciously chosen to enact as a means of self-preservation. The incident in Montreal was a massive turning point that encouraged her to seek safety and knowledge, and to help other women regain control in threatening situations. Training to become a Wendo self-defence instructor, she is now credited for bringing this female-oriented empowerment program to Newfoundland. She has, thus, used her experiences as a springboard to propel herself, and those who she has helped and will continue to help, into a stronger sense of power and security.

#### Seeking

The effects of trauma and stress have been magnified by the lack of support that Renee has received from the community, as she reports that she “never had anyone to support me”

during her battles. Although extremely receptive to help, until very recently she was never able to afford any external services. As she exclaims, “I’ve been looking for counselling since I was 18, but I could never find anyone, because I never had any money, and I could never find any free services”. Renee’s passion for the community comes through at this moment, as she ponders the void of support for people in similar situations. In her words, “I’m trying to do this myself, and I’m trying to be more hopeful about people who are doing the same kind of thing and want to be there for each other. But I just don’t know them. And that’s why it’s a weird thing, like how self-help books are such a huge thing. But it pisses me off, because people shouldn’t have to just help themselves. There should be a community available, where people are supporting each other and helping each other raise their kids. Or like communities cooking dinner for each other”. She states that “Community has also been my number one desire, to have a supportive community. But when I’m going through this stuff, I’m consistently really disappointed with the lack of community supports for people who want to take care of themselves.”

Renee has also experience an absence of support from her own personal community, her family and friends, while undergoing her challenges. As she shares, since moving back home, “I’m feeling very sad, because I’ve been wanting really nice conversations with my friends and family, and I’m feeling a bit sad because I’m realizing that people don’t really want to have those conversations. Not everyone, but just my friends. They’re not really into talking about real shit. They just want to be really surface and talk about TV and talk about my adventures. They only want to know the fun Renee, not the Renee on her journey”. She also reveals that “I’ve lost a lot of friends since I’ve moved back to Newfoundland, because I’ve reached out to them saying ‘Hey, I need support. I’m doing all this stuff’, and they haven’t responded.” She admits that “So, I have been having a lot of anxiety and struggling with feeling pretty bummed. And for the past

year, I have been crying a lot, but it's ok. It's just realizing that I don't have anyone who I could talk to about this stuff and support each other with this stuff".

Renee becomes wistful in her desire to have "a personal community of friends who want to see each other do really good and who are into supporting each other". In her search for such meaningful relations, she has "done a lot of conscious work to force myself to be social with my family, and it's a really vulnerable thing, but it has proved to be very good, and I've developed better relationships with (them) because of it. And I've gone out a lot less doing this personal work. Since I've been back in Newfoundland, I'm not going out as much. There's no gay dance parties that I can go to, or there's no open feminists that I can just hang out with. So I haven't been going out and I've been very, very choosy with who I hang out with. So I don't hang out with anyone! So I've been a bit lonely, but it's ok. I've been catching up on reading and stuff." This down time has allowed her to stop, think, and process, as well as to cultivate more meaningful relationships with others and with herself.

### Feeling

Renee's desire for support has taken an introspective turn, as she has started to look within for that which she is unable to find in her own community. She discloses that, despite her loneliness, "I'm feeling like I'm continuing to build a lot of strength for myself. I'm resilient. I am. I'm a resilient woman, and I always have been. It's hard to describe. It's been a lot of just trying to dig deep within myself, and trying to find some inspiration." She has been reading more and seeking inspirational leaders to follow. As Renee reveals, "I'm at a hungry space. I'm hungry for people to show me where to go to listen to inspirational women. But I'm not finding it. I am feeling very alone with it, but also very strong, and hopeful."

In searching within, she reveals that “I’m trying really hard to listen to my gut when I’m in a situation that I know is stressful. I always tell the kids and the women that I teach to do that, but I don’t listen to my own advice sometimes. And so I find that I am (now) more connected with knowing when I should listen to my gut.” To illustrate, she recalls that “For the past year, I’ve been crying my heart out, because my gut’s telling me to get out of (my relationship with my partner), because I know it’s not a good situation. And I’ve been trying to go to counselling, so they can tell me my gut’s telling me that I’m just afraid of relationships, and I just have some stuff to work on, and that it’s me. But I’m afraid it means it’s just not a good situation, and I should get out. But I’ve been trying to ignore it. But it’s getting harder and harder to ignore my body’s physical reaction to a relationship that’s not working. So my body is literally (speaking) and I’m listening to it. I’m more in tune with even that kind of stuff (now).”

Renee is currently “at a really raw feeling place” wherein she feels vulnerable, and open to the world, like a fresh wound trying to heal. In her field of work, she reports that such a vulnerability is not appreciated and can actually be “dangerous, because I feel like I’m not able to do the work that I want to do.” She describes the insecurity hidden beneath her confident persona, confessing that, “I’m not able to (do my work) with confidence, with not feeling like I’m a fraud. Because I’m at such an emotional feeling, like a really raw space, that I’m not feeling whole. And in the work that I’m trying to do, like teaching women’s self-defence, and being a welder in a male-dominated place where they fucking hate me because I’m a woman, it’s such a funny (thing). I’m always putting myself in situations that are very fucking challenging. But yet I’m in this place where I’m feeling very not solid. Powerful, but only for times, and other times, it’s like the biggest transition! I know I’m transitioning to the best I’ve ever been, and I know that I’m the best I’ve ever been now. But it’s a bit scary. Because I feel like at some

moment someone could be like, ‘Hey! You’re a total fraud. You’re feeling total stress and anxiety, but you’re teaching these women power! Or if a man catches you crying on the job, you’re fucked. So I want to feel way more in control. Because it’s fucking with my confidence, you know? Not feeling solid. Imposter syndrome.’” The strong, impressive way in which Renee shows up in the world protects that part of her that is fragile, delicate, and worth concealing.

### Energizing

As she wrestles with such vulnerability, Renee is entering a new way of being in this world. All of her challenges have brought her to this point, wherein she is understanding herself as both a strong and fragile woman, someone who helps others regain their strength and safety, and, likewise, someone who is seeking others to help her do the same. As she creates this new life for herself, she moves with focus and intention, knowing what she must do in order to keep herself physically and mentally safe and strong.

Amongst all the changes that she has been making, she credits her newly-emerging awareness of nutrition as one of the most significant. Her perspective of food has shifted, as she now recognizes it as a source of energy, and is mindful of making high-energy nutritional choices. As she reports, “I am trying to get really serious about only eating foods that make me feel good, and give me energy. So I’m just really serious about lots of green vegetables, and cutting out as much sugar as I can.” With her physical lifestyle, Renee requires a high amount of energy each day, and she has learned which foods will provide her with the most sustainable form of energy. As she professes, “With me teaching self-defence, and trying to get into yoga, and being a welder, all of that is super physically demanding, and I actually know that I can’t do any of that if I’m eating fish and chips. I physically, actually, my body won’t allow it. That’s a

really fun progress” to be able to make the correlation between nutritional input, and energetic output. She has also opened herself to the idea of food as being somewhat spiritual, saying that “It’s kind of neat, actually, thinking of raw, organic food as something that could make me feel a little spiritual”. Food has thus transitioned from a numbing agent or a party device to something that sustains her and enables her to be physically present in all aspects of her busy life.

This healthful new approach to nutrition is already paying dividends in Renee’s life. She reports that she is “really excited about seeing the results of actually putting high fibre, lots of veggies, and fruit in my body.” One of the benefits that she has noticed in just a few months is that “I do have higher, actually way higher, stamina since drinking my green smoothies. And less joint pain. Less pain in my knees, and less pain in my hips.” In addition to making healthy smoothies part of her daily wellness routine, she is also beginning to prioritize “really long walks every day, and noting how that really makes my anxiety go away, and my head clear. So that’s huge physical appreciation”. Renee admits that “I’ve never sat down with myself and thought, what are my accomplishments with my body? So it’s all coming to me (now). And before when I would jog, which I don’t do often, because my knees weren’t really good with it, and I would get pretty bummed out about my stamina. But I find when I’m walking (now), I want to run. I want to break out in a jog. So that’s really different for me.” Her smile glows, as Renee highlights the changes in her attitude as the result of this growing physical appreciation. She identifies that “my posture is better, because I’m making conscious decisions to walk around like I’m a total fox, with my shoulders back.” Renee now loves “dressing up and going for a walk and just being aware of my body, and feeling like I’m a fucking babe in this body! Look good, feel good!”

### Recognizing

Through becoming more consciously aware of her body, Renee is now able to identify how certain foods impact her. As she describes, “I’m becoming more and more aware of my stomach issues, exactly what I eat, how much it hurts, with my digestion. I get a lot of sharp pain with specific things that I eat. So I’m way more aware now of when I have to have ginger, or when I should stop eating something, or when I need to be way more physically active.” The indulgent part of Renee has not fully disappeared, as she acknowledges that “I do still eat junk food, but I’m way more aware of it when I’m eating it. I’m like, you know what? Totally, I’m doing this, and it’s fun. I’m partying and it’s hilarious, but I know I’m going to be bummed out after doing it, and I won’t do it for a while”. The difference is that Renee is able to feel the aftereffects of over-indulging on her body, and she has decided to not put her body through too much unnecessary discomfort. She understands that “I’m connecting with my body more, because I know that (over-eating) bums me out”, thus listening attentively to her body’s messages.

### Unifying

In Renee’s eyes, mental health plays a very important role in maintaining the homeostasis of a whole person. The story of her own movement towards bodily connection is largely intertwined with her movement towards a stronger and more stable mental health. Renee is now “thinking about being really good to my body, and what’s really good for my mental health. It’s more me thinking about how I can feel really good about my life, and be in a good mood, and feel good.” She realizes that all of the actions that she has taken in her life to stabilize her own mental health have actually helped to bring her to a closer relationship with her body. She proudly reports being “really focused” on the transitions currently happening in her life,



physically and mentally. And, while she admits that the journey has been emotionally challenging, ultimately it is “really exciting, actually that things are changing really quickly”. She admits that, with all of the positive changes in her life, “My body is trying to catch up, really. I am trying to figure out my body, but, like I said, I’m still pretty hard on it. Like, if I’m doing yoga or I’m trying to jog, I’m like, ‘Oh fuck!’ You know? I wish I felt healthier in my body. So, I’m working on the body piece. I am. And I know this is all about connecting with my body, but I’m just starting.” Renee pauses for a moment, and then continues, “I’ve just been starting for a while, but I’m . . . that’s a lie. I was going to say I’m not seeing results, but that’s a lie. I’ve had a lot more physical energy, along with mental alertness.” Her body and mind are now seemingly catching up with one another and healing their divide.

### Stabilizing

As Renee’s body learns to adjust to the new multi-layered transitions in her life, she identifies one element as very important to her physical and mental wellbeing : safety. Her body now has a safe space to call home. Renee has recently been able to create for herself a living situation that is quiet, safe, private, and her own. She shares that, “I would say moving back to Newfoundland, for me, was to purposefully create a safe space for myself. To create a home where I could focus on the emotional and physical piece of taking care of myself.” This is beautifully spoken, from a woman who strives to create such safety in the world for other people in vulnerable situations. Renee glances around at her home with a smile, and confesses, “which is why I have this apartment, which is so nice, for the first time that I haven’t lived with a bunch of punks who open my organic peanut butter and leave it open on the table! That wasn’t good for my mental health, or my physical! So, emotionally, it feels fucking incredible. I’m feeling safer. Safer emotionally, as in, I’m not living with a bunch of people who don’t really

care about their physical or emotional health.” In saying this, the object of her affection, her kitten, Earle Grey, bounces around playfully, adding to the coziness of the room.

### Thriving

At this point, Renee becomes reflective for a moment, as she contemplates the changes that have arisen in the past two months that have motivated her to seek a place to call her own. She and her partner of three years have temporarily separated, and Renee has moved out of their shared home into this one-bedroom apartment. She confesses that this living arrangement is providing her with the ultimate test: sleeping by herself at night, something that she has never enjoyed doing. As she reveals, “I couldn’t sleep by myself because I would wake up crying and shaking, so it’s been really nice, and it’s only been two months now that I’ve been living by myself and not sleeping with (my partner) every night, and I’ve been fine. So that’s a huge celebration. I should throw myself a huge party, actually. I’m feeling really safe in my bed.” Now that she has created a secure space in which she feels emotionally and mentally safe, her body has been given a calm home, one in which it need not be on alert anymore. She declares that “It’s such an incredible thing that I did for my body, to have my own space, and to get out of a situation where I’m constantly sharing a space with someone who gives me anxiety.” After a gentle pause, Renee depicts an image of a body that is resting quietly after a battle, regrouping its energies, suggesting that “I’m giving my body a serious chance to feel at peace.”

In creating this new life for herself, Renee has crossed the threshold between surviving and thriving. As she depicts, “I see it as peeling back the layers of an onion. When I was in survival mode, which I was for most of my life, I couldn’t really peel back those layers, because I was just surviving. But right now, I’m in this taking-care-of-my-physical-and-mental-health mode, so I really am peeling back. More and more is coming. So, emotionally, I am struggling,

but it feels free. I feel very free. I feel like I'm very focused on what I want. Like, I'm surrounded by my pens and my journals and my books, and that's intentional, and my fuzzy blanket. It's really intentional." As Earle Grey hops around the room happily, it is clear that this new feline companion was intentionally chosen as well.

### Consciousness-Raising

Being driven by a passion for community and social justice, Renee deeply understands the impact that cultural forces have upon the body. She asserts that "I definitely, with my whole being, believe that body and mind are connected. And I feel like there's so many things that are shoved on us that would force a disconnect, for sure. Like, this shaming of women's bodies, and the food that's given to us that's not food. Raised on chicken nuggets and things that don't nourish your body or connect you to your body. And how we're forced to be in fucking school eight hours a day, and not being active. So I feel like everything would tear you away from any connection that you have with your body."

With her expansive worldview, Renee suggests, "I'm sure if you'd study cultures, like aboriginal cultures that aren't based on the capitalist society that we have now, they're way more connected spiritually to their body. I definitely feel that being more connected to nature, the outdoors, and then connected to your body and mind, and I think it's all so connected, but it's just ripped away from us, just so that we can focus on working 9-5 and contribute to that. So, I feel that for a lot of people, it's a fight to get back to that connection, to prioritize dancing, and yoga, and eating well, and talking about it, and honouring it." Through Renee's own narrative, such a path of priorities is presently being laid in her life, and she is mindfully following it, step by step, at her own pace and time.

## Honouring

In contemplating the journeys of her body, Renee reveals that her transition towards a sense of bodily connection “means that I’m totally just honouring my body. I’m trying to be really good to myself, and to just be the most powerful I can be. And that means being healthy and strong in my body, and mentally. So it’s a pretty important transition.” She realizes that “With this shit, everyone thinks they’re alone in it or something. But this is everyone’s experience.” And so it is also her experience: the heartfelt tale of a body who has been evolving, flowing, and reacting; a body who has lived in a state of shock and alarm for so long that entering a new, calm way of being is like stepping into shoes for the first time: painful, awkward, and likely to leave a mark. Yet, with walking and dancing and moving, the discomfort subsides, the blister disappears, and a new sense of comfort remains. This is the story of a body and mind that are beginning to co-exist in balance, no longer being separated with extreme shock or stress, and the discovery of the precise formula of physical and mental wellbeing needed to maintain this experience of inner homeostasis.

Thank you, Renee, for sharing your experiences of wisdom, strength, vulnerability, self-care, and dedication. I am in a space of awe and gratitude for you and your story.

## Robyn's narrative

### Grounding

Robyn lives in this world in truth and integrity, grounded in the love of her family and supported by her deep faith. To me, she is the embodiment of the earth, in flesh form: rooted, solid, and calm. As her narrative reveals, she is flexible within her stability, as she respects and appreciates the fluid, shifting nature of life, and trusts in the evolving, journey of her body and spirit. To describe Robyn as playing any one role is to omit colourful pieces of her life history. She effectively balances multiple roles, with ease and grace: mother, wife, student, counsellor, facilitator, aunt, sister, friend. In addition to her career pursuits, Robyn is the mother of three young boys, aged 7, 5, and 1.5 years. It is in this place that her roots find a solid ground, as she raises her boys with a strong base of love and spirit. Robyn and her husband of ten years have cultivated a strong faith background that provides a solid foundation for their family life. Spending time with Robyn is a reminder that one can have whatever one desires – family, love, career, sex, self-care, fitness, personal interests, happiness, meaning, travel, growth – without sacrificing the self.

### Changing

Robyn's body narrative begins grounded in an experience of adoration. In describing her earliest experiences as a child, she recalls that "I remember feeling like other people viewed me as this super-duper cute kid. And I was always told how cute I was, how gorgeous I was". She reminisces upon the household in which she was raised, in which she was openly and lovingly praised by her parents, sharing that "I remember my parents always saying to me, how (much of a beautiful and wonderful and smart and intelligent and capable person that I was)". With this positive self-regard, Robyn blossomed happily, until the third grade, when she suddenly began to

feel a sense of separation from this vision of herself. She reveals that “By the time I finished elementary school, I remember like absolutely, totally identifying as an unattractive, chubby, kid. And that’s when I really started to feel like this. I don’t ever remember not liking myself, who I was. But I remember having this deep sense that I did not like my body. It was like I was working against this thing.”

This sense of alienation from her young body continued until ninth grade when she began to lose weight, and the perceptions of those around her started to shift once again. In her words, “I started to notice that people were commenting that I had lost this weight, that I looked good, and things like that. And so there was a connection made for me probably at that age, early high school, that there was this link with losing weight or being smaller, and being attractive.” Such a linkage would be burnt into her psyche, fueling her actions and thoughts for the next several years.

### Absorbing

Robyn admits that, although she grew up in a household that was full of love and praise, she acquired implicit lessons from her mother about the female body experience that would further solidify the sociocultural messages that were beginning to take root in Robyn’s brain. For example, although her mother would praise Robyn as being “perfect the way you are”, she would, at the same time, bemoan her own physicality, complaining, “What am I going to do with this fat body?” Robyn professes that her mother is a strong, hard-working, and successful person, and yet she was constantly berating her body. As a young girl, Robyn was confused about such conflicting ideas of what it meant to be a woman, as she unconsciously absorbed the message that “This is how we go about in the world. We are strong, capable, intelligent women. We take care of ourselves, and we take care of other people. Don’t tell me I can’t do it, because I can do

it! And I will hate the way I look. And I will always strive to, in some way, feel worthy, but I will never get there.” Robyn admits that, because of such programming, her family of origin was, for her, “a huge part of both my connection, and disconnection.”

### Shifting

This feeling of disconnection persisted for the next several years, as Robyn battled a sense of division with her own body. She reveals that “All throughout university and my early 20s, I was deeply rooted in this disconnection”, wishing “if I could lose a lot of weight, and just change my body, that I would have this sense of connection with my body. I always thought that if I lost weight, I would be connected with my body. I’d have this sense of approval for myself, and for my body.”

It was through this relentless pursuit of her ideal body, through dieting and exercising, that she slowly began to notice a shift in her self-perception. Through making healthier food choices and exercising in healthy doses, she was nurturing herself very well, and she was gradually starting to feel more aligned with her physical self. She stopped trying to become something more, and started to appreciate who she already was. Being ever so astute and independent in her thinking, Robyn shares that she “started to shift away from the idea that I would have to morph into something that would never, ever be me. You know, this idea perpetuated by popular culture. This really unhealthy, very, very thin person. I started to accept (that) that’s not me, and that that’s never going to be me.” As she explains, “It was a bit of a shift away from, if I keep dieting then I’m going to get to be something else. And it was more of like, if I eat well, and I exercise, I’ll be some way that I like. And it might not look like the cover of a magazine, but it’ll look like something that is ok for me.” Robyn then started to internally inquire, “So what does a healthy me look like?”

## Growing

One of the most beautiful pieces of Robyn's narrative is the journey surrounding her pregnancy and birthing experiences, and her life as a young mother. It was during her time of growing in bodily acceptance that she became pregnant with her first child. This would ultimately have long-lasting effects on her connection to her body, mind, and spirit. Her body's story thereafter unfolds in the context of motherhood, as her own physical self brought life to three little bodies who would depend upon her own body for nurturing.

Her newly emerging bodily acceptance was blighted temporarily, once she became pregnant, and her body naturally started to gain weight. This new intruding gain was not welcome. Her first pregnancy was "such an emotional battle", as Robyn professes that "I had lost this weight, and (had) started to feel good about myself, and then was gaining this weight, even though I knew that I was gaining it for a very good reason." She remembers that her friend, who had given birth a few months previous to this, had managed to lose all of her baby weight in a very short period of time. Robyn innocently believed that "that's what happens when you have a baby. The weight just falls right off!"

However, once confronted with the reality of her body as a new mother, she quickly realized that her process would not be quite the same. Robyn describes being completely overwhelmed with confusing questions about her relationship with her body, such as: "What does this mean now, if I don't have this body that I was just starting to learn to like, let alone really love?" She felt as though she was back at the beginning of her journey with her body, and that the relationship had to be rebuilt from scratch. Robyn reports thinking, "Now I'm in this cycle all over again, you know, having to lose this weight. And it was, again, not about being healthy, but about losing weight." Any healthy acceptance of her body that she had once tended



was now replaced by a burning desire to minimize, pure and simple.

### Awakening

Robyn deeply believes in the inherent nature of body connection, and she knows that she once fostered such as a child. Life experiences derailed her connection temporarily, yet this experience of connection was still there, written in her cells. A few months after the birth of her son, Robyn remembers having her first discernible experience of bodily connection as an adult. As she describes, “The first moment that I ever felt a sense of connection with my body was actually a very spiritual experience”, uniting her mind, body, and spirit. The dormant connection began to re-awaken.

At this time in her life, Robyn and her family were living in Vancouver, and they had gone on a retreat with their church community, in a park just outside of the city. Robyn paints a gorgeous portrait of this retreat, as a time of returning to nature and exploring spirituality in connection to the earth. One evening, while lying with the group on a field at dusk and watching the stars twinkle, Robyn began “having this moment, realizing that this creation that I was in the middle of. And it was such a beautiful place, and the mountains, and the lakes, and the flowers, and the trees, and this nature that I was so in awe of. It was so beautiful, and (I thought) that, to my creator, I was that magnificent. It was like the earth, like my whole world was turned upside down with this idea, that I was that marvelous. And, for the first time, I started to think of myself as a creation. That I was this creation of God and that I was perfect. It was really powerful.”

Robyn appreciates that “It was such a beautiful experience to have this realization. And it grounded me in myself in a way that, even as that ebbed and flowed over the years, that I can always come back to that sense of this beauty and majesty, as a creation of God. So that was probably my very first real sense of connection with myself.” This powerful spiritual epiphany

inspired a re-stirring of the awakening that had commenced previously within her body. It was as if, through connecting with her spirit, and through seeing her own innate perfection mirrored in the natural world, her body acceptance was now returning, re-uniting the bond between her physical and spiritual self. In her words, “I would say that before that, I had been working towards an acceptance of myself, but it was in a context that was still very cultural.” This personal awakening propelled Robyn into a new way of understanding her body and the world, that had little to do with her as a cultural being, and more to do with her as a spiritual being.

It was through the cultivation of this new perspective that Robyn was able to reflect on her first pregnancy, and unearth the gems that lay within the experience. While, at the time, this had been an emotionally challenging time for her, in retrospect Robyn discovered a sense of deep gratitude and appreciation for her body. She affirms that, “After having this shift (and) finding some connection with my body, it was cool to have this feeling like, ‘Wow! I grew this person inside my body! And he came out so absolutely perfectly!’ And my experience of birthing him was so wonderful and so powerful for me that I remember feeling like my body works so well, that I’m this powerhouse, that I carried this child around for nine months, and, despite my judgement of how my body was doing, that, in the end, I was perfectly healthy, and my baby was perfectly healthy. I was strong enough to birth him, and everything went perfectly well, and I felt so empowered by that.”

By bringing another life into the world, Robyn was blessed with an understanding of her body that she had never experienced before: as a functional, living, breathing being. She relays that “I had been so connected to the idea that my body, and my physical appearance, was a part of this cultural scene, that all it was good for was attracting friends, attracting men, being a presence in school or work, just that this was so important to this other world, that I never

stopped long enough to think of it actually as a functioning, living being. And so that was an awakening to me, too. Outside of how all this looks, it's functioning, it's doing something for me. It's allowing me to be in this world." The shift from body-as-outer-experience, as a cultural symbol, to body-as-inner-experience, as a way of being in the world, is clear in her words.

### Struggling

After experiencing this emergence of divine awareness, Robyn reveals that the struggle between the body and the self continued to spin. While Robyn's inner world had been rocked by her epiphany, her outer life did not budge: "Nothing had changed in my body, and nothing had changed in my world." With a newly-cultivated understanding of herself as an embodied and spiritual being, she was challenged with messages from society, as well as the deeply-entrenched ideologies that had developed throughout her life. Robyn's mind oscillated between such questions as "What does getting my body back mean? Does it mean losing weight? What if I don't lose weight? And who am I now that I've had a baby, and that I've had this sort of spiritual awakening about myself and my body, and what does that mean for my life, and my routine?"

Being grounded in faith, she selected a Bible verse to support her through this time of inner turmoil: the psalms that declares that "you are fearfully and wonderfully made." Robyn remembers "reflecting on that, and meditating on that, thinking like 'I'm fearfully and wonderfully made, and God knows every hair on my head, and they're numbered, just like the stars in the sky. And I've got a lot of hair!'" It was this positive approach, and the faith in her interconnectivity with something that she could not fully explain, that encouraged Robyn to continue to nurture her growing understanding of connection, bodily and spiritually.

## Listening

As she describes, “Around that time, when I was figuring that out, like, who am I and how can I be healthy, I started to realize that I’m actually happier when I exercise regularly. I feel better. I like myself more, regardless of whether or not the scale changes. I’m more sexual. And there was that light (that) went on for me, and it was like, there is a reason for me to move my body, beyond this war between calories in and calories out.” And so Robyn began looking for ways to be kind to her body.

She reports that this new approach to movement “was just new to me, because I think that, before that, the only reason I ever thought to exercise, like purposely go out and move my body, was always for the express purpose of burning calories so that I may hopefully lose weight.” Now, however, her endeavours were for a different reason, sharing that “It wasn’t for attracting somebody. It was more about attracting myself. I would like to feel sexy. I would like to feel attracted to myself. And it wasn’t so much like, oh, I couldn’t accept myself as I was. But I thought, I am worth putting the time and energy into doing this, and feeling good about myself. And so it was from a very different place than my previous efforts at weight loss. It was more like, I am worth the time to go to the gym and move my body. I am worth the time to get good food and to feel good, as opposed to shoveling something in my mouth, whatever I can get my hands on, whenever I can get my hands on it, and feeling gross. So it was more healthful.”

Robyn then arrives at a profound insight: the knowledge of her own self-worth. She illuminates this understanding by suggesting, “It was more about being worthy. I feel like all my efforts at diet and exercise (in my past) were because I was unworthy. Because this current thing was not worthy and it needed to change so that it could become worthy. And after I had Benjamin, it was more like, I am worthy, and so I will do this. Not like, I will do this so I can

someday be worthy.” Clearly, the birth of her first child birthed within her a new understanding of herself as an individual of value, worthy of time, energy, and effort to nurture self-love.

### Fluctuating

Fluctuations continued to colour Robyn’s journey, as she was constantly flitting in between experiences of disconnection and connection, never quite feeling solid or grounded in either. In the midst of re-discovering connection, her old thought patterns sporadically slowed her progress, so deeply engrained were they. Robyn discusses “this entrenched sense of dissatisfaction and almost anger” that she harboured toward her body, professing that “It was really hard to turn that off and allow this new feeling of acceptance and peace, peace about myself, absorb.” Her brain was finding it difficult to accept the new challenge of body acceptance and body love. Being a counsellor, Robyn understands the idea of brain patterning well. As she suggests, “If you think about brain mapping, and those negative pathways being reinforced over years, there’s that way in your head that just moves in that direction. So, having to create a new map, your intentions can be all in the very best of places. And you can have a profound spiritual awakening, and still find yourself waking up the next day, and looking at myself, and thinking, ‘This is just not good enough’, and then having to remind myself, ‘Yes it is!’ So that has been a bit of a process. It has been confusing emotionally.”

### Birthing

The transitions of her body may have been confusing for Robyn; however, amongst the ebb and flow of her sense of embodiment, she has experienced moments of physicality in which she could be nothing *but* embodied. As a mother of three young children, Robyn has come face-to-face with her own body in relation to other bodies on a very regular basis. For her, the times of providing, and sustaining, life for her children, are moments of being totally grounded in her

body. Robyn affirms that “Some physical experiences may have perpetuated, or moved along, the process of connection”, including the birthing and breastfeeding of her three babies. As she reveals, these experiences of being a mother have permitted a “returning to that place” of her original embodied awakening, through “getting these glimpses at how powerful my body (is)” and how vital it is to her babies’ lives.

Her first experience of bringing a child into the world was a very pleasant experience, as she was very lovingly supported by a midwife. Robyn reminisces that “The birth of Benjamin was definitely a spiritual experience, of this feeling of being supported by my midwife, and being supported by this person in such a physical (way), that somebody else was so amazed, and appreciative and encouraging of the physical power of my body. That was definitely a spiritual experience, having somebody else acknowledge the health and vitality and power within me, physically.” The birth of her second son was similar to the first, in that she was well-supported and listened to during her time of need. Her third experience, however, is still tinged with bittersweet memories. As she and her family were living in Newfoundland at that time, where midwives are not regulated nor utilized, Robyn found this last birthing experience particularly traumatic, due to lack of professional support and total denial of her instinctual needs. This experience was the catalyst for one of the most significant periods of disconnection thus far in Robyn’s life.

### Traumatizing

Robyn reveals that she “had really high expectations for my birth with Griffin, because I had had these two really positive, fantastic experiences”, and, yet, “My birth with Griffin was so different from the other two.” She and her husband had gone to the hospital, “knowing I was in labour, knowing I had short, quick births with my other babies.” Yet, when Robyn told the staff

that she could literally feel the baby coming, the nurses did not believe her, checking her cervix, and advising her to go home for another while. As she exclaims, “This was really devastating! I knew that this baby (was) coming, but nobody (was) listening to me.” By this point in her life, Robyn had birthed and breastfed two babies, and had experienced her embodied awakening; thus, she was feeling very connected to her body. During her third birth, Robyn “knew my body, (and), at this time, I felt so confident and in tune with how I have babies. And it was my third time doing it! So I really knew! I had such a deep sense of knowing that I am having this baby, and this is how far along I am in the process, and this baby is coming.”

Robyn refused to leave the hospital, and, within moments, she felt her baby’s head start to appear. The nurses put her into a wheelchair, right before the baby fully emerged. When Robyn yelled at the nurse to “Hand me my baby”, the nurse refused, saying that the cord was too short. Robyn screamed, “Hand me the baby! Put the baby through my legs and hand me my baby!” and the nurse eventually relented. Once Robyn had finally been handed her baby, she was swept with “this deep, deep sense of loss.” A mournful shadow presently flashes across her eyes with the memory. Robyn reminisces that “After I had Ben and Luke, the moment they were born, there was this sense of joy, this sense of pure joy, that this happened, that I did this, that I birthed this baby, and he was so perfect. And it was such a beautiful moment. When I had Griffin, that moment did not happen, because of the circumstances. And instead there was a feeling of relief. Like, ok, it’s over, which was very different from this deep spiritual sense of joy. It was just like, ok, the fear is gone. I feel relieved. But it was not that moment of first seeing your baby, and that sense of safety and joy was not there.”

Robyn recalls that “It was a very confusing time, those next few hours, of, instead of feeling so empowered, feeling so disempowered, that someone had just taken this from me.” She

remembers being livid, and very much detached from her experiences at the hospital, admitting that “I felt angry, but then I also felt like, I don’t care about you people. I don’t even care enough about you to be angry. I just want everyone to leave me and my baby and my husband alone, and just get us out of this hospital, because it represents everything bad, and I just want to go back to my home. Where I really needed to go, was back to my safety at home, because you people are not providing anything for me, except for this sense of taking away my control, and taking over this space that was sacred, and you’ve infringed on that.” Robyn’s clearly felt violated, disrespected, and betrayed by those who had been tasked to help her.

### Falling

The days following, Robyn “fell into this deep dark depression”, in which “I just didn’t feel like myself. I didn’t know who I was.” In the midst of this darkness, however, her own light of hope and resilience shone through, as she promised her husband that “I’m going to be myself again. I’m going to come back.” While wrestling inner agony, the bodily connection that she had been nurturing began to wilt. Amidst the haze, her body was no longer a priority. In fact, Robyn acknowledges that her relationship with her body did not even factor into her cognition at this time. In her words, “to say I was connected to my body . . . I mean, there was no connection with my spirit, and I think, for me, not to be connected to my spirit, there is no other self. So it doesn’t mean anything that I wasn’t connected to my body, because I wasn’t connected to my soul. I wasn’t connected to my body, but that wasn’t really important, because the sense of having my soul intact was gone.”

In this period of fragility, she was also engulfed with the fear of losing herself in her role as mother to three small children. Robyn was overwhelmed with such questions as “What else am I? Who else am I? Am I anybody else?” These questions, which she had been posing herself



since firstly becoming a mother, now intensified with the expansion of her responsibility, coupled with the lasting effects of the trauma which she had endured. Robyn identifies this period as the most depressive and disconnected period of her adult life, saying that she cannot remember a time as dark and fearful.

The trauma was the catalyst, but it was not the only reason for the plummet into darkness. Robyn recognizes the significance of timing in life's events, and as she reflects on this period in her life, she pays particular attention to the season in which her depression evolved. Robyn and her family had recently moved from Houston, Texas, and, following her baby's birth in December, she had to re-adjust to the frigid climate, while in a fragile, weakened state. Her body did not react well to this drastic change in temperature, and Robyn attributes this maladjustment to the elevation of her depressed state. She is convinced that "My body had become accustomed to a high level of vitamin D, and then, all of a sudden, (there was) none." This suggests that, even though Robyn suggests that her sense of bodily connection had been completely disrupted, the connection was still there, buried in her cells, as she was able to mindfully feel and interpret her body's reaction to the chilly winter weather.

### Seeking

Amidst her sorrow, Robyn recalls "having a sense of hope that I am going to come out of this. I'm not always going to be like this. And that I'll do whatever it takes to reclaim myself." As she recalls, "My own counsellor self kicked in, and I was like, ok, what am I going to do? Should I go talk to somebody? And I didn't really know who I would go talk to. So then I was like, what have I done in the past when I've been feeling not-so-great about myself? What sort of successful things have I done in the past that have helped me? And so I thought, I need to start moving again." She approached this new endeavour with a desire to find "a sense of balance in

my head”, rather than any desire to lose weight.

Robyn describes her experiences of movement at this time as being helpful to her in multiple ways. In her words, “I was moving my body, but I was also spending time by myself. I was getting a shower, without the baby crying outside. I was going to the gym. And I was trying to eat very intentionally, things that I felt like were not going to make me feel bloated, and things that would feed my best self. And, so I was like, I need to eat, and I need to move, and get out, and try to find myself again. And I started taking vitamin D. And, over time, I did lift this fog.” Once she was able to peer through this rising haze, a new sense of confidence emerged. She describes that “As things started to slowly shift, I remember feeling that sense of empowerment again”, as she realized that her experience was “not something that I can’t deal with. That we, as a family, and me, as a person, (can’t deal with). I felt like, I am still integrated. Even though I’m lost, I’m just lost. I’m not gone. I’m just lost.”

### Functioning

Her connection with her body then began to grow, as her connection to the other little bodies in her life was growing as well. She adjusted to her role as three young children very well; her role as provider and sustainer of life helped her re-frame her own body experience and appreciate who and what her body was. Robyn attributes her choice to breastfeed her children as adding to her understanding of herself as a functional body. With her first child, she admits that breastfeeding was a massive learning experience for both parties, feeling that “I don’t know how to do this, and neither does this baby!” Yet she recalls “feeling this deep connection with this baby, almost at the expense of myself at some times, like, ‘I can’t leave for too long! I’m the feeder lady!’”

As she recounts with a smile, “I remember the day my milk came in, and my breasts were huge, and my nipples were sore, and I was just walking around topless in our apartment, saying to my husband, ‘Don’t even look at me too hard because it might hurt!’ And I said to him, ‘I know it looks like I have porn star boobs, but do not touch me! Don’t even breathe too closely, because I’m just in so much pain!’” Her body’s functionality at this time, thus, trumped any of its other purposes – culturally or sexually. She vividly remembers that it “was such a shift from (the idea that) the primary purpose of my body is for attracting, and socializing, and finding my place in this culture, and then, all of a sudden, the primary purpose of my body is to be this physical, functioning being that feeds this baby, and carries this baby, and births this baby. So, yeah, all of a sudden there was this shift, and I was very physical. And it was all about function.”

### Trusting

With her second child, Robyn’s confidence in her mothering skills strengthened, and she trusted in her body’s ability to do whatever necessary in order to nurture her baby. She shares that “When I had Luke, it was a very good experience physically, spiritually, emotionally. I felt more powerful because I had had a good experience with Benjamin, and I felt prepared this time. And after I had Luke, ok, so he didn’t know how to breastfeed, but I did. So I had that leg up. I had experience, and I had confidence in myself, and I had patience, and (I had) that sense (that) I know what I’m doing, and this will all come.” She also had a newfound trust in her body that it would know exactly what it needed to do in order to provide for her babies. She reveals that, during her second pregnancy, “My body was faithful. I felt like it was faithful to me. I remember feeling like, ‘I’ve done this before, and I know how to do this, and my body knows how to do this.’ And it did. And it fulfilled its part of the bargain. Things went well. I feel like it was faithful, because I had a set of expectations, and it performed.”

Because of this acceptance of her body's strength and ability, Robyn was much gentler with its changes throughout and after her second pregnancy. She did not bash herself for gaining weight, nor did she try to lose the weight in a hurry. She recalls that "With Luke, I was really dedicated to being healthy, and to feeding myself what I needed to eat, moving as much as I wanted to move, and resting, as well." She, essentially, gave herself "a lot more grace" with her second son, having "this sense of 'I have done this before, and my body just gained all this weight because that's what it needed to do'. So I thought that I have not done anything wrong. It's not like I've been sitting around eating Big Macs and just deciding not to move for no reason. I did what I needed to do to be healthy, and to keep my baby healthy, and this is the weight that my body needed to gain. And so be it. So there was a bit more grace for myself."

With the pregnancy of her third son, Robyn gave herself even more grace. As she reveals, "I felt really good about my pregnancy with Griffin, like I had finally, on the third try, figure out how to be pregnant, and enjoy it as much as I could." Robin admits that, unlike other women who blossom in pregnancy, she has never quite felt that way. With a laugh, she reports that "I have very often been like, I feel tired! And I feel like I have a parasite inside of me, sucking away all of my life energy, and stealing it for themselves. And I would like to have some back! And so pregnancy has not always been for me some sort of blissful thing." However, with her third son, Robyn "appreciated it more". She recalls being gentler with herself, while having "more glimpses on, like, ok, there's a reason I'm tired. And stop trying to fight against that and just sit your butt down and relax! And I was active. I ran for at least half of my pregnancy. And that made me feel like myself, like I wasn't being totally taken over by this pregnancy, that there were still parts of myself, things that I like to do that I was doing, even while I was pregnant. And so that was all great." Clearly, although the birth of her third child had been traumatic, this

pregnancy experience was beaming with positive energy.

### Passing Time

Throughout her story, the fluctuation between connection and disconnection is evident. Robyn has oscillated ebbed and flowed with her body through the experiences of her life, and she has always bounced back with renewed energy and resilience. One constant in her journey has been time, and the way in which the passing of time seems to be naturally carrying her towards the direction of bodily connection. As Robyn reveals, “Time has been a factor in the continued sense of connection. I would say that even now it is an ongoing thing.” Robyn suggests that aging also plays an important role in her present movement towards connection, as she feels that now, as a mother at the age of 33, she has entered a new realm in which society views her with much more gentle eyes. Robyn suggests that “What looks good, quote unquote, in your early 30s might be different from what I thought was expected of me as someone in my mid-20s. So, all of a sudden, even without my own sense of connection and my spiritual groundedness, the world all of a sudden sees me as being attractive, because, oh well, now I have three kids, and I’m 33, and somehow my body, that has changed very little, in terms of my weight and shape and things like that, since high school. But in high school, that was not really great. It was ok, but you could definitely use some improvement. But now, at 33, with three kids, I feel like, oh well, you look great! And nothing has changed, but time.”

### Deepening

Another benefit for her body of the aging process is the fact that she now surrounds herself with people who seem to appreciate their own bodies. She shares that “The people around me now aren’t talking all the time about, you know, how am I going to lose this weight? Or I wish my belly was flat, or I wish my arms were toned, or this thing, or that thing.” She also

identifies that any competition that she once experienced with other females has disappeared, as they are now “all rooting for the same team”. As she describes, “I remember feeling that idea of, especially with my relationship with other women, that this shift and this sense of being connected, and this sense of having an appreciation and acceptance of myself, meant that I wasn’t constantly judging myself or comparing myself with other women.” This lack of judgment and competition, opened up a space, which “allowed there to be a deepening in my relationships with other women, and I felt like I was able to appreciate my relationships with other women more, because the competition had been removed. And so once I was able to appreciate my own body and have a sense of my own place in the world, then I felt like that was reflected socially in my relationships, especially with other women.”

#### Appreciating

The journey of Robyn’s body thus far has been colourful and dynamic, as it ebbs and flows with life changes. Robyn strongly believes that, if it was not for the fact that she was connected to her body, she would not have been able to label the experiences of disconnection as such. Thus, if she had never been connected, she would never have been able to identify the disconnect. Robyn professes that “Now when I think about being disconnected and the fluidity of it, I really think the only time I was really disconnected was before I had that original sense of connectedness.” In reflecting on this statement, she adds that “Actually, in a sense, even just that I knew that something had shifted in primary school, that I knew that, ok, before I was cute, and now I’m not, even that shows that, at some point, I had some sense of connectedness as a very young child. And then I lost it. And then, as an adult, I was able to realize that I had lost it and that that wasn’t normal.” Robyn feels that if she ever loses this sense of bodily connection again, due to any change in her life situation, she now deeply appreciates that “it’s worth pursuing to

find it again. Because the seed has been planted. You're never unaware. Once something has happened to you, that's it."

### Integrating

To Robyn, developing a connection with her body has extended into all other areas of her life, adding to her wholeness. To her, being whole means that she mindfully nurtures each of her intelligences: emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual. She understands that body connection is "not just one part, because they are so integrated and intermingled" that, in missing one piece of the whole, she was missing significant chunks of her being. So, as she says, "Every part of me was not whole because that part (had been) missing." She now understands that "In my experience, that disconnect affected so much of myself: my relationship with myself, my relationship with others, my relationship with the world, my creators, God, whatever you want to call it. It just affected me so much", holistically.

In fostering that physical intelligence, she feels a "sense of power that I would never have dreamed feeling before, in terms of who I am, and my presence in the world." Robyn professes that this "means that the person that I was created to be, I am becoming." And she recognizes that this power is gift through which she is now able to fully see the power within each person. Robyn reveals that "to be able to acknowledge the power in myself, and then be able to acknowledge, support, and encourage the power in other people" is a blessing. As a counsellor who has cultivated such a strong connection with her mind, body, and spirit, Robyn appreciates that "It definitely impacts my work. I feel like now when I'm rooting for other people, that's more authentic. Now I view my work more in terms of one creation and another creation, together, working to find new meaning, and find new patterns, and so it's more about empowering the person and helping them to find their own sort of value."

## Embodying

Throughout her life, Robyn has been surrounded by power female role models. In developing a sense of connection with her own self, she now believes that “I am those things that I see in other women. I can be. And I am. The things that I see in other women are being born in me, are being created, or being nurtured in some way.” And she recognizes the colossal responsibility of being a strong female role model in the lives of her three young sons. In her words, “I think that by mothering boys, if I’m going to go around talking about my fat belly or squishy this or squishy that, or I need to change this, or I need to change that, then I’m going to raise these men who are going to expect that other women are going to want to change their bodies or morph into some sort of unrealistic expectation, and that they’re going to expect of women some sort of unnatural and unhealthy body image, and that somebody who is confident and loving their body is not necessarily a good, positive thing.” Robyn feels “like having found a sense of connection with myself like that is going to strengthen the way that I parent these men. And I hope that that will influence how they interact with women, and how they are in relationships, and how they learn to love and appreciate women.”

The story of Robyn’s body does not simply include her own body’s journey, but rather that of the three little bodies that she has lovingly brought into the world and for whom she mindfully creates a loving, balanced life. Robyn’s journey breathes connection: with self, with husband, with family, with babies, and with spirit. Her story of connectivity sets the groundwork upon which her sons will build their own connectedness to the world.

Thank you, Robyn, for sharing the story of your embodied awakening. Gratitude, also, to the three little bodies in your life, which, together, add beautiful elements to your body’s journey.



## Katrina's narrative

### Calming

Katrina is a calming breath amidst relative chaos. She is full of vibrancy and energy, and the life that she has created with her diverse family reflects this. Even before stepping into her house, I catch a glimmer of such energy, in the form of her two massive dogs, who greet me enthusiastically through the door. With one glance and a calming word, Katrina soothes their frenzy and gives me the space to enter her world, which, I am soon to discover, is dynamic and life-giving, and balanced in its own way. Her family consists of two friendly Great Danes, an outspoken Cockatoo, an orange tabby cat that strolls between our feet, and a guinea pig and bunny who cuddle together in a large cage. In addition to her fur babies, she has a young son, who shares his time between Katrina and her former husband. This is the relative chaos, in which she provides the calm. Katrina exudes such a smoothness that is challenging to put into words, but that can certainly be felt. She is a woman who has lived a colourful journey, and who has derived wisdom and confidence through her challenges.

### Achieving

Katrina begins her story with her earliest moment of bodily disconnection, as a talented athlete in high school. A dedicated track runner, Katrina had been training with her coach with the ambition to receive a full scholarship to Harvard University, who had been scouting her. She recalls that “All I was focusing on was, if I can run faster, I will be better, and I’ll get out of here. I’ll be able to get out of this house. I’ll be able to leave this place, to leave this life. I’ll be able to be someone different”. As she reveals, all of her intentions were directly related to her body, and its ability to perform. It was this pressure that led to an imbalanced relationship with her body and food that would be the norm for the next several stages of her journey.

To reach her goal, Katrina trained “six days a week, for three hours a day”, subsisting on minimal amounts of food. Minimizing her intake “wasn’t something that I was cognizant of doing. It just slowly happened over time, where I noticed I wasn’t eating as much, and I started eating less and less.” Her body soon began to revolt to this gruelling regime, as she started to throw up blood during training. This, she reveals, “started happening on a regular basis, because I was so hard, and I wasn’t eating properly.” Katrina remembers thinking one time, at the age of 16 or 17, having thrown up again that evening, that “The skinnier I am, the faster I’ll run”. This was the first moment at which her desire to be extremely thin, for the sole purpose of running, came to light as she made the conscious decision to streamline her body at any cost. As she adopted this regime, Katrina recalls developing a new perspective of her body “as a third person observer”, as if watching her body from a distance. Yet she pushed herself onwards, believing that the harder she pressed her body, the greater her reward would be.

### Swinging

Katrina’s ambition to become a university track athlete did not ultimately turn out as she had expected. She shares that “The university track thing didn’t work out for me” and that “It was a huge upset (in) my family” that she did not receive the coveted scholarship. Her life experienced a shift as she decided to go to another university, and it was at this time that her disordered eating patterns began to swing in the opposite direction. Rather than starving herself for the sake of success, Katrina began binge eating, perhaps out of the disappointment of not achieving her track dreams. She recalls eating and purging repeatedly for the first semester of the year, as her once-streamlined frame steadily rose to 200 pounds. As had been the norm for the past few years, Katrina was living her life through her body, albeit in a very different way, and her faithful body bore the brunt of her choices.

During her second semester at university, an internal urge began advising Katrina to make some life changes. She had stopped going to classes, and was in danger of failing out if she did not alter her direction. And so, Katrina began running again, although she admits that “That was hard, because everything was heavy. I just felt disgusting.” Her perspective of her body had shifted from a symbol of success, in constructing herself as a runner, to a symbol of disgust, as she had to learn to live in a bigger physical form. As she was gaining weight, and adjusting to its feel, Katrina recalls thinking that this change in bodily form “meant that I was a slob. I was yucky.” In her words, “everything internally came externally”, with the additional weight, as her body told the tale of imbalance in her life.

### Measuring

The following year, Katrina decided to begin afresh, by relocating to Costa Rica. She arrived in the country as “a pudgy 19 year old”, and twelve months later, “left as a very, very, very, very slender 20 year old.” Her eating disorder had followed her abroad. During her stay in Costa Rica, Katrina admits that she lost at least thirty pounds, “eating only a cupful of rice each day, because I didn’t think I deserved anything else.” She encountered another shift in her bodily perspective, as she began to develop an idea of herself as being unworthy of food. This was a new feeling for her, and, as before, her body adjusted accordingly to her thoughts and choices.

Despite eating very little, Katrina describes how her time in Costa Rica was literally spent “next to food”, as she was gardening and collecting fresh vegetables each day, and as fresh fish was delivered to her doorstep daily. Yet, she made the choice to survive on only a cup of rice, which she would carefully measure, each day. This was “a very conscious decision” as she would “eat one kernel at a time”, taking her two hours to finish it. One day, having deviated from this routine, Katrina ate two sandwiches, and she “remembers running all the way

back to the beach. Back and forth, back and forth, going, I've got to run off those sandwiches! I've eaten too much. I'm going to get fat." This frenetic thinking was directly related to her feelings of value. While minimizing her food, Katrina felt worthwhile and successful. When eating, regardless of the amount, the balance tipped towards failure and unworthiness.

Katrina then felt a re-focusing of her energy inwards, as her battle with unworthiness further ignited. She burrowed herself inside her own mind and shut off connection with her body's voice, resisting the surfacing of any emotion. As she professes, "In Costa Rica, it all went internal again, and I tried to control it with food. So it was an attempt to control the emotions about how I felt about myself, with food." Despite this battle, however, there is a shining light, as she reminisces on her experiences in Costa Rica as a time of truly living, feeling that "I'm alive again. This is life. I can live. There is life outside of my family home." Despite the imbalance between body and mind, Katrina views this experience as connecting her, once again, with her life energy, that had all but dimmed while living at home in Nova Scotia.

### Shifting

Katrina describes her return to Canada as being like a see-saw, as she barrelled from one extreme to the next. Upon her return, she "ended up becoming like the living dead, because I was gray. I literally had dark, dark eyes, and white, white skin." Settling back into her familiar habits of bingeing and purging, she steadily began to gain weight. The balance was still shifting, back and forth, never fully settling. And, once again, it was her body upon which this imbalance was written.

In moving back to Nova Scotia, Katrina began living with her uncle. She "couldn't go back home, because my step-father was still there, and he (had been) very emotionally abusive for thirteen years". As Katrina shares, "I had sexual abuse for two years when I was younger",

with whom she does not disclose, “and then I went into an emotionally abusive home for thirteen years. And my mom just said, you’ll get over it. You’ll get used to it.” Katrina refused to accept such abuse, and chose to live with her uncle. This is the first glimpse of the story from which Katrina came, and provides a background of instability that potentially mirrors her journey of imbalance.

### Promising

She describes an evening at her uncle’s house, “sitting down and digging into his canned foods, and literally sitting there until I was drunk on food”. She then recalls “throwing them all in the garbage, and trying to hide them, and then having to think, oh my God, I’m going to have to go back and go buy all these groceries. I just ate all his groceries!” This moment plays in her mind, not because of the amount of food she consumed, but because of the epiphany that she had immediately following, a turning point in wherein she discovered something that had been missing for years: grace and self-love. After coming down from her food drunkenness, as she describes, “ I looked at myself in the mirror, and said, you have to promise yourself, if you do one good thing for yourself a day, you cannot beat yourself up. And I had to look at myself in the mirror. And I don’t know why, (but) I think I just got to the bottom of it.” She realized intensely that “I just could not keep going like this anymore” and “I just knew I had to change something. I was not going to do well if I kept going this route.”

From this point onwards, Katrina made the genuine effort to do one positive thing for herself every day. She “would go, you’re beautiful, I love you, and that could be my one good thing of the day”. In addition to making these shifts in her self-perception, Katrina also dedicated herself to balancing her eating patterns, as she was tired of the constant swing from famine to feast, and was beginning to think about how such upheavals were damaging her body and mind.

Katrina made a promise that she “was going to keep every single bit of food I ate down my throat. That was my other thing to myself. So, if you go binge eating, sorry lady, you do it to yourself. You’ve got to not do that. And I don’t know what I read, or what I heard, it was like a guide to myself. I just knew that I had to stop.” After discovering this new way of thinking and being, Katrina started feeling more at ease in her life. To find space to accommodate her self-growth, she decided to return to university in another city, and to continue where she had left off, years ago. While admitting that she was still relatively unhappy at this time, she “was trudging through it” and gradually “started getting happier”.

### Detaching

A different form of bodily disconnection then entered her life, unrelated to food or weight. At the age of 21, having recently refreshed her life, Katrina became pregnant, and she was delighted with this because she has always been a very maternal person. However, as the pregnancy was topical, there was many complications and, as she phrases it, it “didn’t work out”. She had to have several Dilation and Curettage procedures, which took a physical toll on her body. Katrina reveals that, when “They finally got it (the fetus)”, “it was dead”. This traumatizing experience brought with it disconnection unlike Katrina had ever experienced, as now it was a detachment that she was unable to control. This was totally an inner experience, not of the mind, but completely in and of the body.

Amidst this trauma, Katrina began experiencing flashbacks of her childhood, suggesting that she had been sexually assaulted at five years of age. Katrina admits that these memories, although unexpected, should not have been surprising, stating that “I knew there was always something off (about) me, because I (have) always had a lot of stress.” When she lost her baby, and was faced with the emergence of such memories, something clicked within Katrina, as she

recalls thinking, “Oh my gosh! That’s why I’ve been so sad!” It felt as though, through her sadness, she was able to fit some pieces of her story together, to form a picture that somewhat explained certain aspects of her life. This period of her life “progressed a very big disconnection” within, and Katrina began cutting herself in order to mask the inner pain. Her body began to show this imbalance, as her disordered eating patterns came crashing back into her life. Her “body was shrinking, and then going up and down like crazy”, totally knocked off centre once again. During this time of imbalance, she shares that “There were some attempts at suicide, but it was more like, in fact, a cry for help. There was so much pain internally.” Katrina notes that she “was very cognizant that I was just living, and my body was just there. I didn’t like it. I wore baggy clothes. I wore clothes that hid who I was”, as pain consumed her life.

### Seeking

In order to deal with her surfacing memories of abuse, Katrina decided to confront her mother, who dismissed her pleas by retorting “that it didn’t happen”. This reaction caused a massive rift in their relationship. Katrina also sought the help of several therapists, “because I knew that I needed help. I knew that I wanted to get over this. I just knew that there was a better life.” Try as she may, Katrina was unable to find someone whom she could really trust. The one therapist that Katrina “really counted on” stated that she did not believe the story of abuse, as she was not able to remember certain details. To this day, Katrina finds it difficult to understand how a therapist, who specializes in sexual abuse therapy, was able to arrive at such a conclusion. For Katrina, the abuse exists clearly in her memory, brought to the surface of her conscious mind by the trauma that had been imposed upon her body.

Katrina has always created her life in alignment with her own personal truth. As she reveals, “I’ve always wanted to talk about truth. I always say, words matter!” Thus, realizing

that people in her life did not believe her truth was a devastating blow for Katrina. Although she felt strengthened by her own self-belief, her body did not adjust well to the masses of memories that kept popping into her mind, and she had nobody in whom she could confide. Try as she did to bring herself back into balance, by exercising regularly and getting back to a weight with which she was comfortable, the ground beneath her feet was still very shaky.

Katrina recalls getting ill at this point, and having to be hospitalized for three months. The doctors were unable to diagnose her precisely, saying that perhaps her illness was related to a bug that she had picked up in her travels, although she had been back in Canada for more than a year. They also said that it could have been the beginning stages of diabetes, or irritable bowel syndrome, but Katrina knew implicitly that her condition was something other than a physical examination could diagnose. After surviving on baby food for three months during her hospital stay, Katrina experienced another turning point in her life, at which time she remembers deciding, “I’m not doing this.” And, as with her previous epiphanies, she “got over it (her illness). And it was just a decision, honestly. It was just a decision that I was going to get on with life.”

### Cycling

The philosophy of “getting on with life” worked well for Katrina, for a certain period of time. Having found a new job and a new relationship, Katrina felt herself coming up out of the shelter in which she had been living for years, as she climbed her way back to her vision of success. However, as with her previous experiences, what went up eventually came crashing down, as her relationship became unstable, and her cycle of success/failure continued to whirl at rapid speed. Katrina and her partner, having gotten married, decided to go to couples counselling to work through their problems. She admits that this “didn’t work at all”, as they were both



struggling with their own personal issues, and were “creating situations” to blame their stress on their partner.

At this stressful time, Katrina recalls teetering on the see-saw yet again, as she rapidly oscillated between binge eating and over-exercising. She was living in extremes, and could not find a comfortable place in between. She is now able to identify this period as yet another cycle, in which she was spinning back and forth, without lasting long in either place. As she proposes, “I hadn’t yet discovered the things that would enable me to really stop these cycles. So I’d go through these cycles of being really, really successful, and then it’d all crash down.” As she suggests, “it was always unbalanced.”

Amidst the cycling, Katrina recognizes the role that her body continued to play, as both innocent bystander and wise medium. She professes that “I always thought through my body. I always lived my life through my body. Not only did I feel a lot, but I always associated it with my success. If I was physically strong, if I was in shape, if I was looking good, I’m like, then I do deserve to have the success.” On the upside of the cycle, in her new relationship and new job, she was moving towards a stronger feeling of connection with herself, in which she was listening to her body’s messages, being kind to herself, and respecting her needs. On the downside, she would be overwhelmed with feelings of unworthiness that would perpetuate an increasingly stronger bodily detachment. At any point in the cycle, she acknowledges that the connection between body and mind was never truly there. In her words, “It wasn’t really connected, because I was still seeing me and my body as two separate things. I saw my body as, well, if you’re healthy, and strong, and looking pretty, then you ought to be successful. So it wasn’t like this joining and coming together and loving my body. It was more of, you can only be successful when you’re in shape.” By tying her self-worth to the size of her body, she was becoming

alienated from her sense of body and self.

### Pushing

Prior to her marriage ending, she had forged a new career path, by joining the military. This career change fit her way of being at the time, as it forced her to be in peak physical condition, which amplified her feelings of self-worth. At the age of 30, while most of her comrades were young men in their 20s, Katrina proudly states that she “topped that course” and that she was “the first woman in a long, long time (to do so)”. Although this accomplishment brought her success, she describes the detriment of pushing her body to such an extent, as she battled “complete and utter exhaustion: mentally, emotionally, and physically”. Katrina admits that the training was damaging to her, physically, and that she was unable to “keep that level of exercise up” once the training program had finished, thus perpetuating her next “crash”. As she describes, “Here I was on an upward cycle, and then boom! I came crashing down.” During this fall, Katrina was in the midst of getting a divorce, making the impact that much more painful.

### Changing

Ever the resilient optimist, Katrina decided to begin anew, moving to Toronto, where she began working full-time. Unhappy in this city, she soon turned her sights eastward, and found a job in Newfoundland. Upon arriving in this province, Katrina recalls that she was “physically fit, (and) I felt really good about myself”. However, she soon began to minimize her food once again: a very conscious decision on her part. She recognizes that, gone were the days of self-love and grace, as she “wasn’t being kind to myself”, feeding herself a steady diet of negative self-talk. During this time, Katrina became pregnant once again, unexpectedly. In “aligning (herself) with this bad person”, Katrina felt that she did not “deserve” this pregnancy, and she had an abortion. Ten months later, however, she became pregnant again, and this time she decided to

keep her baby.

### Questioning

It was at this point in her life that Katrina came face-to-face with yet another turning point, one that would perhaps have the most lasting effect. In entering a relationship with what she describes as an “emotionally unavailable” man, and in becoming pregnant with their child, Katrina began to contemplate her past history of relationships, and to question why she continuously attracted people of the same emotionally-distant type. With this new life growing inside her, Katrina began asking herself “the questions”. And this, she highlights, “is where life really got interesting.”

For Katrina, “The interesting part was that I said to myself, how do I stop the cycle? That was the question.” This inquiry had risen to the surface of her awareness for a reason. As she relays, “Now I have a son, and I have not had a really good male relationship in my life, that I can remember”. She made the solid choice to “have a good relationship with my son. I choose to see who men and guys really are! I choose to see how we really are. How do we operate?” And so she “stopped seeing men and women, and I started seeing beings. That’s the only way that I can really put it. Because I was not going to separate myself from my son. There was no way that I would ever do that.” Katrina admits that “As soon as he was born, I was terrified to have him, but, my God, as soon as he was born, I was in love. Total love.” She found a new source of self-worth that had little to do with her body size, and everything to do with this new life that she had created.

It was through asking herself important questions that Katrina opened up a space for the answers to grow. As Katrina professes, questioning “opens up everything. Because if you ask a question, you’re not necessarily looking for the answer, (but) it allows you to uncover what’s

actually there. So if you don't ask the question, then it's like there's no room for that awareness to happen. The questioning opens up your awareness." Questioning her own relational patterns stirred within her the awareness that, throughout all of the relationships in her life – social, familial, sexual, romantic – she had not been willing to expose her vulnerability, as she did not trust anybody with her fragile parts. She became aware that “trust and vulnerability (are) the key to all relationships” and that, by shutting off this flow, she was shutting herself off from developing meaningful relationships that were welcoming of fragility and build on trust. Thus, she would attract people into her life who were seeking neither vulnerability nor trust, as this is what felt comfortable to her. This knowledge brought her down a new path, where long dormant voices, thoughts, and emotions began to wake up.

### Growing

As Katrina shares, with this awakening, “This is where the connection started. And this is where I was like, ok, I'm changing my life! I have to keep consistency now. I have to provide!” With the birth and growth of her baby, Katrina's self-perception began to grow as well, and the see-saw, upon which she had been precariously perched for all those years, seemed to come to a place of relative balance. In seeking connection with herself, Katrina became hungry for knowledge, and learning entered her life in various forms: from watching documentaries to taking workshops, she journeyed deeper into her own self. Through the affirmation work of author Louise L Hayes, Katrina began to cultivate self-love and self-acceptance, the seeds of which she had planted years before. She describes that “As I was doing the affirmations, I would literally get up every morning, have a little prayer, (and) say what I'm thankful for.” As she dedicated herself to this new routine, little changes began to evolve in Katrina's life.

After some time, she felt the urge to journey even deeper into herself. As she learned through the work of Brandon Bays, she needed to tap into her sub-conscious mind in order to get at the root of her deeply-entrenched programming. As Katrina explains, “In order for you to really clear out and stop the cycles of your life, it’s the subconscious programming that you get in utero, when you’re zero to seven (years old), and everything you hear around your parents.” Through delving into this programming, Katrina came to realize that most of her thought patterns were deeply anchored in fear, and that she had “created every single fear in my life.” Katrina wrestled with the fear that she was not “good enough” and that she had no support in her life, although her mother, and her ex-partner, the father of her child, had been offering support to her in their own ways. Katrina reveals a particular fear of her mother at this time, as she worried that she might take her son away, as her mother had often said that “If you don’t want him, I’ll take him”. This frightened Katrina, who wanted more than anything to be a good mother to her son.

It was only when her young son actually was taken from her by her ex-husband, for reasons unexplained, that Katrina was forced to reflect on her mother’s words. There, she came face-to-face with the fears from which she had been running. Upon looking internally, she reports that “It was not nice what I saw. In fact, it was pretty damn scary, because then all of a sudden I realized that everything that had happened in my life, I’d been responsible for.” She began to understand that what “my mom was reflecting to me was all of my deep-down fears” and that it was up to her to clear these fears from her life. In that way, she would not project them onto the people around her, allowing these people to show up in her life in a different way. Thus, she set about with the intention of clearing her relationships of the fear that coloured her every thought.

## Clearing

In “clearing the fears”, Katrina refers to the process of releasing fear, such that it loses its power in one’s life, by replacing it with another emotion. Before releasing it, however, Katrina recommends that the fear be fully felt, so as not to dismiss its presence. She emphasizes the transient nature of emotions, explaining that clearing “is not about the story. It’s about the feeling. And it’s amazing how quickly you can run through a feeling and just let it out of your body when you actually sit down to feel it. But when we ignore it and push it away, it lasts forever! It gets bigger! You (have to) let them e-mote. Let them through your body.” For Katrina, clearing is the art of “emotional realignment” that concentrates on getting rid of old thought patterns and creating space for new. It involves many different types of introspective, holistic activities, designed to re-set the programming running through the mind.

Katrina describes one exercise, in particular, in which she invited different parts of herself back within. As she explains, “I felt I had all these past memories of being different women (and) I invited them all back in. At the end of it, it felt like I invited all the bits and pieces of myself back into me. And I was ready to really own me again.” She describes another exercise in which she invited herself to live from her heart, rather than her head. In her words, “I did these exercises every day, and instead of living in (my) head, I was living in my heart. It’s a drop-down elevator exercise. (Imagine that) you’re in the elevator on the tenth floor, and by the time you get to one, you’re in your heart!” Through conscious practicing of this activity, she shares that effort is no longer necessary as “I’m in my heart. I can feel my heart radiating. I can feel my chest expanding. I can feel that, every time I make a decision now, I do it from my heart. And it’s such a different answer from what you’d normally get.” Through this work, Katrina was able to release her own fearful energy, and welcome in new discoveries about herself. She learned

that “Instead of being angry with everybody else, I was really angry with myself. (So) I made friends with me. And now I can see changes happening in my world. And it’s all through my body.”

Along with personal benefits that Katrina received from doing such intensive self-work, she felt as though this type of work is something that should be shared with others, so powerful were the shifts in her own life. Thus, this personal process paved the way for another career change, as a naturotherapist, which enables her to engage the techniques of clearing in order to cleanse her clients of their limitations and fears. She proposes that “All of this wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t done the work through my (own) body.”

### Embodying

As she began clearing her fears, Katrina reminisces that “Every day I felt like I was taking another layer off. The ugly layer suit was coming off. And every day got better and better and better. And there were some days when I would clear, and I would lose my path. There were some days (when I was clearing) that my belly would blow up, like I was pregnant. It (was all) just emotional stuff.” Katrina also recalls a time in which she “literally lost nine pounds in one night” after doing some clearing work. Her body, thus, reacted in varying ways to the emotional flow occurring in her life. It was through the teachings of an author, Rikka Zimmerman, that Katrina discovered the physical connection of a thought, especially one based in fear, and its direct influence that such a thought has on the cellular composition of the body.

And thus, in exploring her own deeply-rooted fears, Katrina’s awareness of her body increased. Whereas her body has once been the pages upon which her colourful story was written, she began to identify her body as being a medium through which her thoughts and energy flow. An appreciation of her body started to grow, as she “came to look at my body like

this amazing being, this amazing vessel to be in.” She reveals an emerging awareness of the loyalty of her body, realizing that, as she had battled with negative self-talk and thoughts of unworthiness, her body had remained totally faithful. It was her mind that had been propelling her into a war in which her body was the battlefield. As Katrina describes, her body was “always such a friend to me over the years, and I was so nasty to it! And now that we were making this friendship with each other, then there was this soul connection! I had to open up my soul connection, and then I started to really feel like I was in my body. Because I (had been) living outside of my body, (and) then I invited myself back in.”

### Choosing

This connection was, thus, all about choice: choosing to identify the programming of the past that no longer served her, choosing to embrace her vulnerability, and choosing to create her own life on her own terms. This ability to choose has been a constant in Katrina’s life, stemming from the first conscious choice that she remembers making, as a nine year old girl, choosing that “This cycle stops with me”. Choosing that the cycle of alcoholism and passivity, transmitted throughout generations of her family, would not be perpetuated by her. Katrina, as an adult, continued to uphold this choice, by working hard to clear her own emotional baggage such that it would not be passed along to her son. In doing such intensive work, Katrina admits that she has experienced a dichotomy of grief and joy. Mourning, she says, the life that she once had, while “bringing the joy to what I am having”. She professes that “It has been a death on one aspect”, as she bids farewell to people and situations of her past, “ to a rebirth, to truly living on another, and truly living in my body.” Katrina allows both feelings of dark and light to sit within her, recognizing that they are both in her for a purpose, and that it is through one that she recognizes the other.



### Appreciating

Gratitude is an energy with which Katrina lives now, on a daily basis, as she expresses thanks to herself for her body, and for everything in her life. She affirms that “I am now living through my body” in very positive ways, and she deeply appreciates her body as “a sentient being that is assisting me now to pick up all the messages and say, ‘Hey, do you want your life to be even better? This is what I’m feeling for you to clear’. And I feel it in my body.” This newfound acceptance and awareness of her body has enabled Katrina to remain with herself, as opposed to running away, which is how she lived a significant part of her life. Stability is now also present in Katrina’s life, as the see-saw has, evidently, stopped in mid-air, neither up nor down. As she professes, “I no longer have to run from (my body). I no longer push food down my throat. I no longer have that association with food at all. In fact, I now rejoice in eating what I’m eating. I rejoice in everything that I do. I don’t worry about it anymore. I don’t even think about sitting down and having a whole cake anymore.” She affirms that “Now, I love food. I love cooking. In fact, I want to become a chef at some point. I want to own a restaurant. I work in a restaurant now. And I love serving food, and having people over for dinners. It’s a different association through my body. But it’s really through me.”

Exercise, upon which her body once heavily relied, has also taken a step backwards in her newly developing way of living . Katrina now exercises if and when she feels like it, revealing that “Fitness is now mostly a stress reliever, rather than a I-have-to-do-this-in-order-to-feel-good.” As she shares, “Now a walk is a walk to enjoy nature. It’s not a walk to go, how many calories can I burn off?” She recognizes that “My focus is no longer seven days a week. It’s three days a week of exercise. And I’m really happy with that.” Gone are the days of extreme physical goals, as she now strives to be healthy enough to run outside with her son, or

with her dogs at the park, or ride horses, without getting winded. While she is not exercise-centric any longer, she does still see the value in keeping her body active and healthful.

However, Katrina now views the concept of health in a holistic lens: mind, body, and soul. As her body enjoys moving, so too do her emotions and spirit. Katrina reveals that “If I don’t exercise on a daily basis, I don’t freak out. In fact, the more emotional work that I do, the slimmer and freer I feel. And so I know the more emotional work that I do, I actually feel like that’s my workout now. I flex the emotional muscle.” She has developed such a way of truly listening to her body that she is now able to interpret its emotional signals. As she discloses, “When I’m sad? I sit down and I feel it. Because that’s what I’m used to doing now. So now it’s like, ok body, what are you showing me today? Oh, you’re showing me this! Oh, wow, that’s a pretty heavy, intense emotion! I’m not going to keep myself busy. I’m not going to sidetrack myself. I’m not going to beat myself up. I’m just going to sit down and feel it.” This is quite the contradiction to the way in which Katrina once lived, in which, as she admits, “I couldn’t even sit on the couch! I was keeping myself busy. I was distracting myself. And I would go to the fridge and eat whatever I could, just to stop the emotions from happening.”

### Rooting

As our interview winds to a close, Katrina brings to light her over-arching philosophy of bodily connection. In her mind, we enter the world as “connected little beings” and, thus, connection is always truly there. As with any decision in life, however, it is up to the individual person to “choose to exercise that connection”. Katrina believes that we may become disconnected due to our earliest attachment experiences with our family of origin, and because of our fear-based belief systems and thought patterns that stem from this time. In her opinion, the cultural messages that we receive exaggerate the messages that we have already received from

our family. Katrina believes that “Culturally, we pick up on all the signs: the fashion magazines, the pop culture, the stars, and all that crap. Body as an object. Power struggle. Body anxiety. Body hatred. I don’t think that it causes (disconnection), but it certainly doesn’t help. It certainly doesn’t help you to feel really comfortable with your body.” She muses that, “If your family is pretty happy and connected, I think that you have a buffer zone that’s better than others, to not buy into that stuff. But when you don’t, and you’re exposed to a lot of the ugliness people can feel about themselves, and you take that on, then you can be preyed upon to absorb some of those other cultural biases.” Katrina declares that “I think that society has a lot of ways in which they think they can control is, and that it’s time for us to take that back. It’s time for us to live in a different space.”

### Honouring

Katrina is certainly living in a different space, a space that she has created by herself and for herself, that she shares with her diverse family, and that she fills with peace, love, and calm. Her ambition of the past has settled into an acceptance of the present, as she has learned that it is “about going with the path of least resistance. But going with the path that is true to you, as well. And asking the questions to follow that river. And knowing it’s there!” Katrina professes that we all must “Listen to the wisdom that you have in your body. Listen to you. And trust that you know what’s right for you, and you know what’s wrong for you. And trust that. And don’t let anybody else tell you different. And if you feel sad, feel sad. Don’t act it out. Feel it, and then choose to be happy.” In her eyes, when you listen to your body’s voice, “everything has a magical way of working out, because you’re in tune with where you’re supposed to be. And you don’t even know sometimes how you get to be where you’re supposed to be. I listen to the whispers of my body.”

As she exclaims, she is no longer hiding within her body; she is “no longer wondering what this body is going to do, and how it’s going to sabotage (me).” She feels as though she is “finally coming into me” and that that her body is “who I am”; her body reflects this truth, by giving her the sense of balance and relaxation that she had been so actively seeking. Along her path, she has realized that “This body is more than a body. It is a holistic program that’s here to help you evolve your being.” Her journeys have led her to this point of balance, wherein her body is also a teacher, a partner, and a friend.

Thank you, Katrina, for being so open in sharing your vulnerability and challenges. Your growth, and the awareness that you have attained therein, is inspirational and beautiful to witness.

## Bonnie's narrative

### Centering

Bonnie is a vivacious spirit who is colourful, dynamic, and captivating. While her energy is vibrant, she is also calming, centering, and still. As I walk into her beautiful home, the space speaks to me of the love and peace that she brings to her family and life, and I immediately feel welcome. As a counsellor, facilitator, mother, and wife, Bonnie has mastered the art of making one feel appreciated and safe. And as an individual who deeply honours her spirit and the spirit of others, she creates her life in alignment with her beliefs, living on a level that is meaningful and connected.

A world traveller, Bonnie understands the unity between us all, as she approaches life with a very expansive viewpoint. An amazing testimony to her desire to explore such interconnectivity occurred years past, as she and her husband took their two children on a year-long adventure around the world. Recently, she has led a mission to Guatemala, where she and her group helped build a wing on a school, and she has a trip planned to visit her daughter abroad within the next few months. For Bonnie, the world is one, and it is inspiring to see her reach out to embrace it.

Locally, Bonnie also appreciates and inspires connection as a board member for a violence prevention team. In addition to her community activism, Bonnie enjoys keeping herself active in body, spirit, and mind, through both taking and leading retreats, engaging in a variety of physical pursuits, and honouring her sacred connection with meditation and prayer. Bonnie's life is full; her schedule is blocked. Yet, as she says, it is a beautiful fullness that she has lovingly nurtured and created, and for which she feels blessed.

## Wounding

Unity is an important element of Bonnie's story. Through her eyes, we come into the world as whole beings, innocent and complete, in union with body, mind, and spirit. She reveals that "I believe that we come out with (an) innate capacity, and we're all integrated and whole and beautiful and embodied." Throughout her own childhood, Bonnie felt such embodiment, as she enjoyed "a great freedom with my body", enthusiastically engaging in physical activities of every kind. In her words, "I moved a lot. I danced a lot. I played a lot. I rode my bike. I swam. I had a very healthy relationship with my body."

At the age of ten, however, continuing its natural evolution, her body "started to get thicker". This bodily change provoked one of her friends to label her as a "fatso". At such a tender age, Bonnie was unable to comprehend the meaning behind her friend's words; she remembers being confused and taken aback. It was the first time that anyone had ever targeted her body in such a disparaging way. As Bonnie describes, it was her first "external assault". Bonnie declares that this body-jolting experience was "the first memory for me of woundedness around my body. It was the first external judgment directed at me, that I can remember." As she professes, "My body was healthy and whole and beautiful and active, and the minute someone spoke that I was fat, that's when I took that on (that) there's something wrong with me." She identifies that that was the point at which the innate "Unity between my mind, my body, and my spirit broke", instigating "the beginning for me about the story with my body".

## Detaching

Such was the beginning of the disconnect, wherein Bonnie experienced a detachment on two levels: she became removed from her sense of her own physicality, as the body that she had so wonderfully enjoyed for ten years was suddenly attacked and identified as different; and,

similarly, she felt a distancing from her relationship with food, which, until this point, had been healthy. Bonnie recalls that, as a child, her relationship with food “was always very free”, and she would enjoy eating chips and candies with her friends, “like normal little girls would do”. She reveals that “I certainly was, by no means, fat, but someone had labelled me as fat, so then I took on that label, (and) something happened inside of my psyche. I don’t know, but something happened for me”, triggering the beginning of the divide. The psychological attack forced her emerging understanding of her body suddenly to veer off path, and her perspective shifted discernibly, as she now was faced with the belief that “there was something wrong with me”. Somewhere within her social or familial sphere she had internalized the message that fat is wrong, and that she must, therefore, not be fat. Being fat, she had learned, meant that she was unlovable, and Bonnie, as a little girl, found this idea to be very confusing. She did not want to be unlovable, and yet now, apparently, she was.

### Struggling

As she struggled with the confusion of what it meant to be labeled fat, Bonnie began “sensing an awareness that food then started to become different for me. It was then (that) I noticed that it was comforting. Food became something else at that moment; it wasn’t fuel.” Bonnie began to feel uncomfortable about food and eating, because, as she was learning, “Food makes you fat!” This message was certainly being reinforced for Bonnie at home, as several of her immediate family members were dealing with their own food-related issues. Bonnie recalls that her 14 year old morbidly-obese sister was constantly being reprimanded by their mother for her nutritional choices. Thus, refrains of “You don’t need to eat that! You don’t need that food! Stop eating that! That’s not good for you!” provided the background noise at their house. In addition, her mother, who had had 2/3 of her stomach removed with ulcers, used to vomit her

food quite frequently, as she was unable to keep anything down. Everywhere little Bonnie turned at home, she was faced with an unhealthy relationship to food, and a reminder that food causes fat, and fat is not accepted. Through such influences, Bonnie was beginning to formulate an idea “that there was something wrong with food.”

The following year, at age eleven, Bonnie reminisces that she “was coming into full blossom, with my breasts and hips. I was thickening!” During this natural body evolution, another shift was taking place in her young life, another over which she had no control. She explains that her all-girls school, in which she had excelled for many years, was slated to close, and she and her classmates would thereafter attend a co-ed school the next year. This change was particularly traumatic for Bonnie, and she had had limited experience interacting with boys, and the thought of doing so was daunting. However, as the change of puberty that was slowly altering her body and mind, Bonnie had no choice but to flow along with this newly-imposed shift.

### Absorbing

It was around this time, in the early 1970s, in which Weight Watchers was becoming a hugely popular cultural phenomenon, and several of her family members were eager to join. While it would be another few years before Bonnie would jump on that social bandwagon – which she eventually did, at the age of 14 -- she began to lose weight by her own means in the months leading up to the new school year. This may have been due to nerves, or perhaps a concentrated effort to impress her new school mates, or perhaps an extension of the weight-loss endeavours that were happening within her own family. Whatever the rationale, she ended up losing approximately twenty pounds, in total, by the end of the summer, weight that she admits that “I really didn’t need to lose”. This was viewed in a highly positive light by her family,



themselves on a weight-loss kick. As she describes, “It got celebrated to get thinner”, particularly in a family and a culture which were beginning to harbour a very unhealthy obsession with body and food.

Bonnie acknowledges that her body’s journey was greatly impacted by cultural influences, especially at this young age, as she was constantly being surrounded by damaging messages about her body. She absorbed learned behaviour through society’s portrayal of the body in media and entertainment; as well, she was absorbing it at home from her mother, who would constantly project twisted body image messages onto Bonnie’s older sister. Bonnie recalls “learning it all around me in my family of origin, and extended family, about diets, and weight, and pills, and weight loss, and Weight Watchers”. Clearly, in receiving confusing messages from a multitude of spheres, she was becoming “very consciously aware that people, or things outside, (were telling her that) you don’t measure up!” And, as Bonnie admits, “It hurts when you don’t measure up”, especially as a young, vulnerable child who is experiencing her own bodily changes for the first time. Her rapid and unnecessary weight loss was thus instigated through a combination of intermingling factors, and took a damaging toll on her developing body and impressionable mind.

### Violating

The following September, the school year brought with it challenges and experiences that were “new and exciting” for young Bonnie. She adjusted very well to having boys in her class, and even began to enjoy the experience. Bonnie reminisces about this stage in her life, as she was physically developing, and catching the eye of the “cutest boy in the class”. It was during this period that she became aware of the effect of her maturing body on her classmates. In Junior High, this effect became more pronounced when the boys began grabbing at her breasts. This

behaviour was possibly perceived as playful and harmless at the time, and no interventions were put in place to stop it. Bonnie reveals that, because of such incessant bodily intrusion, she was afraid to even go to her locker, because someone would inevitably end up touching her in ways that were unexpected and unwanted. In retrospect, Bonnie identifies that “They were really molesting us, but, at that time, no one talked about that.” Thus, the behaviour persisted, pitting the vulnerable female bodies against the hormonally aggressive male bodies, in a seemingly accepted way.

Understandably, Bonnie found such intrusive behaviour to be “terribly uncomfortable”, and she affirms that it had damaging consequences on her own developing relationship with her body. She battled with an enormous amount of pain and shame, in enduring the hurtful violations on her body. As Bonnie professes, “There was tremendous shame being touched. With people grabbing your breasts at your locker, you wouldn’t tell anybody! I mean, you were terrified! So that certainly had a lot of impact on my disconnection.” It was at this raw age, and through such unwelcome actions, that Bonnie came to realize “that I had body parts that appealed to the other sex”, and all the implications that came with that knowledge. Thus grew her understanding of the experience of being a female body in a male-dominated world.

While experiencing such abuse at school, Bonnie’s vulnerability was also rocked at home, as she was inappropriately touched on two separate occasions, by two separate young males: once by her friend’s brother, and another by one of her cousins. The groping at school was one thing that began to shatter Bonnie’s sense of connection; when she experienced indecent genital touching, any remaining strands of connection abruptly disintegrated. Bonnie’s confusion at this time was overwhelming; however, she had to suffer in silence. These episodes of molestation were enshrouded in secrecy, as Bonnie feared what may happen if she were to tell.

She affirms that these experiences of violation constituted “the real turning point for the woundedness around my body. The hate, the loathing. (I was) totally disconnecting in an unhealthy way”, and it was all due to actions and behaviours that she was unable to control.

### Objectifying

As a child, Bonnie had received very clear messages regarding sexuality, from her Christian family, who upheld the belief that the body was sacred and must not be touched. It was firmly engrained in Bonnie’s belief system that “good girls don’t” engage in any sort of sexual activity. The unwarranted sexualisation of her body, thus, was deeply religiously and emotionally scarring, leaving Bonnie adrift with engulfing waves of shame and guilt, and inundated with fear and confusion. She was puzzled and frightened of the idea that her body was suddenly becoming public property, opened to the whims of the hormonal boys surrounding her, and she did not have anyone with whom to confide such fears. In the deafening silence of secrecy, her inner pain ignited. Bonnie confesses that her experiences of abuse “broke me inside”, and remained buried within her body. As her voice trails off, I am left with a vision of a young girl, struggling to make sense of the pain and confusion swirling through her developing form, the connection with her body slowly fading away.

Because of these traumatic experiences, a “tremendous amount of disconnection” began to build within Bonnie, as did a new sensation: a desperate desire to change her body so that it would no longer be an object to satisfy somebody else’s pleasure. As she relays, “All I wanted to do was to change it to make it something that it wasn’t. Skinnier, or something. I certainly didn’t want it as an object.” While in no way minimizing her own experiences, it was not only her body upon which this war between masculine and feminine was raging. In reflecting on this time in her life, she parallels what was happening in the world around her to what was happening within

her own body, detailing that this was the era of body objectification, in which women's bodies were being collectively viewed as "things". Bonnie recalls that "the image of the body in the 60s (and 70s), when I was growing up, was absolutely insane!" This was the era of Twiggy, Bonnie explains, and the adulation of Miss Universe and Miss Canada. Female bodies were being broadcast everywhere, as objects of desire, beauty, and fashion. Thereby, while suffering through her own body objectification and its emotional and physical repercussions, this was, culturally, being reflected back to her. The female body, it appeared, was becoming public domain. As Bonnie reflects on herself as a youth in this changing era, she is "very mindful of where she (her younger self) got her messages, and I'm very kind to her and compassionate with her", knowing that she tried her best to stay grounded amidst all of the bodily and cultural changes in which she was enmeshed.

### Shaming

In the years following her experiences of trauma, Bonnie struggled with a shifting relationship with her body. The molestation could never be forgotten, yet its memories, and resulting shame, remained concealed. And the firm external attention that was placed upon her body followed her from one stage of life to the next. As she began university, Bonnie realized that the behaviour of the boys at school, so many years before, had not changed with time, exclaiming that "The boys were wanting to grab hold of my boobs then, same as they did when they were thirteen!" Once again, the intrusive actions of males created further divide between Bonnie and her body, as she came face-to-face with the unwanted attention. In order to handle the hormones being directed her way, Bonnie would drink alcohol and be free with her body, making those interactions easier to handle. Labelling this period as a "phase of disconnect" Bonnie identifies that she engaged in "very self-destructive behaviour for me at the time"

because “It was like looking for love in the wrong places, but not really understanding the disconnection with my body. Not knowing how to use my body or what I felt about my body.”

After several drunken sexual experiences, shame began to infiltrate her world once again, as Bonnie viscerally felt that these casual flings were not “in alignment with how I wanted to live”. She desired connection – bodily, emotionally, spiritually, relationally – and she was not able to find it through such unfulfilling experiences. And yet, as before, she had no one with whom to discuss her thoughts and emotions, as the cultural silence of yesterday had continued, and the people in her life were not interested in having such conversations. This was another era of confusion, as society was feeding them many different messages about how to live, without providing the means or forum in which to discuss such ideas. With the lingering of the high religious ideals from her past, dictating what good girls should and should not do, intermingled with emerging feminism, bringing with it great amounts of sexual liberation and pro-choice activism, Bonnie was confused. She describes this as being a very puzzling time, culturally and personally, of lingering silence and shame, balanced with budding freedom.

### Awakening

In her third year of university, having decided that she did not want to live unaligned from herself anymore, Bonnie suddenly “woke up” to her own power. After being subservient to other people’s handling of her body – family, friends, males, and media -- she became aware that she had a vital part to play in her own physical experience. With this blossoming knowledge, Bonnie consciously made an effort to claim her body as her own, by eating well, exercising, and learning more about her body’s needs. For once in her life, she began to realize what her body liked and disliked and, now working and making her own money, she was able to buy food to satisfy her own desires. She describes this period in her life as “coming into freedom”, as she

came into her own sense of body empowerment. While living consciously, she admits that the battle between self-love and hate was still raging within, fueled by buried shame. However, with each step that she took, she was becoming more aligned with her bodily self, through the art of mindful self-care.

### Growing

As Bonnie professes, her body's "story is much more tender, loving, gentle, and compassionate because this body has given me the gift of life for two incredible beings." She affirms that pregnancy was, for her, the ultimate time of embodiment, and that she truly came into her own bodily connection at the age of thirty, upon becoming pregnant for the first time. While she had nurtured a very healthy relationship with her body in the decade following her embodied awakening, Bonnie appreciates that taking care of the body and loving the body are two separate constructs, and that she had not yet fully achieved that state of unconditional bodily love. Pregnancy encouraged her "to actually, really, truly, and honestly in my heart place love my body". The promise of life within reminded her that her body had to be cared for with attention and love, as it was now a home for both herself and baby. Her pregnancy experiences, as she joyously recalls, instilled within her such a love and grace for herself that returned her to the feeling of innate connection that she had nurtured as a very young child, prior to the imposition of external trauma. Her relationship with her body thus became "healthy, and kind, and beautiful, and not restricting, or changing, or loathing. It was incredibly loving!" As she fondly remembers, "I just wanted to nurture (my body) and keep it healthy."

In gratitude to her religious upbringing, Bonnie had always harboured the understanding of her body as a precious temple and as a "gift from God". Upon becoming pregnant, this understanding was never clearer in her mind. She praised the sacredness of her body, and its

ability to bear new life. With this sacred feeling of embodiment, Bonnie felt herself turning away from the influences surrounding her, those that preached mixed messages of body image and distorted notions of health, and began to nestle within her own self, blossoming with her pregnancy as she and her baby further developed as one. It was, thus, through conscious disconnection from sociocultural and familial influences, that inner connection began to flourish, between Bonnie and her baby, and within Bonnie herself.

### Triggering

Such a blissful connection with her body grew throughout the pregnancy, the birth, and the care of her first child. As Bonnie shares, “I loved (my body) through then. I loved it while I was nursing, and then I disconnected again.” Bonnie admits, because of the weight that she had gained throughout her pregnancy, repressed feelings began to stir. Long-dormant programming from her past arose, as she was overcome with unexpected waves of body disdain, based on the notion that she had gained fat. And, as she remembered from her past, fat was not accepted. Gaining weight, despite its wonderful purpose, meant that she was unlovable, and disgusting, because the programming from her youth told her so. The self-love and joyous body connection that had been flourishing, thus, began to wilt, as “the old got triggered again”.

Bonnie’s second pregnancy experience mirrored the first, in both the connection and disconnection effects. After having her first child, Bonnie wallowed in body hatred for some time, as she battled with her weight. However, a few years later, she discloses that “I came back into love again when I was pregnant with my second child”. This time the experience was different, as now Bonnie knew what she needed to do in order to sustain her inner balance, so that she would not be caught in waves of disdain once again. Taking a loving approach to her body, and respecting its need for movement, Bonnie diligently maintained her running routine

until her sixth month of pregnancy, and she resumed this routine not long after her son was born. This routine helped to ground her, and gave her the space that she needed in order to stay connected to her physical experience, even as her body was changing. This immediate return to physical activity after birth aided significantly in helping Bonnie protect her positive relationship with her body, as she shares that “I loved my body for quite a while” after the birth of her son. However, this love was tinged with lingering frustration and disdain as Bonnie, as before, struggled to lose the weight that she had gained throughout her pregnancy. And, yet again, the old voices began to whisper in her ear.

### Fluctuating

Throughout the next decade of her life, Bonnie’s sense of bodily connection wavered and flowed. There were moments of complete connection -- cultivated through exercise, nutrition, and prayer—and yet the moments of disconnection had a tendency to crawl back in. Bonnie identifies the fluid moments of bodily disconnection as being linked to particular episodes in her life. Thus, as with her earliest experiences of disconnect, it seemed that the detachment was brought upon by an external force: either through words, actions, or incidents. And, similarly, it was as if, whenever such a situation would arise to instigate the disconnect, Bonnie’s long buried programming would immediately re-surface, bringing with it the negative voices from her past.

The shifting nature of her connection was revealed particularly to her upon moving back home to Newfoundland several years ago. Having spent most of her adult life with her family in another province, Bonnie was overcome with feelings of loathing and disdain, in returning to her home province. She attributes this a result of returning to the scene where so many of her traumas had transpired. This was a time in which she was moving back and forth between bodily connect and disconnect. A few years after moving home, Bonnie was forcefully thrown back into



detachment, as she was involved in a serious car crash, which resulted in severe bodily injury. Because of mobility issues following the accident, she was not able to partake in most of the physical activities that she enjoyed. Her body gained back some weight, and her programming ensued, provoking body hatred to crawl into her life. Through a mindful dedication to self-care, however, this hatred lessened over time, and she was able to return to a space of self-love and appreciation of her changing form.

### Loving

It is her commitment to self-love and self-care that has enabled Bonnie to return to a place of connection with her body, despite its challenges and ordeals, with patience, love, and grace. As the result of her body struggles throughout the years, she has developed a solid understanding of what she needs in order to return to a feeling bodily connection. For Bonnie, the body and self are so intertwined, that, in loving the self, the body feels the love as well. To regulate the flow of such energy, she has a toolbox of techniques that she may use to maintain this love emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Amongst the many self-care activities that Bonnie regularly uses to remain grounded are meditation practices and daily body scans, both of which permit her to tap deeply into the flow of bodily connection. In addition, as an athlete, she has cultivated connection through the making of physical goals, such as increasing her weekly running distances, learning a new sport, playing tennis, doing yoga, and taking a dance class. Bonnie revels in challenging her body in physical pursuits: “pushing it, playing with it (and) taking it to its limits.” She also enjoys treating her body to regular massages, and having her nails done. Little things like this are her ways of showing attention, love, and respect to her body for all that it is and all that it helps her to do and be in this world.

## Balancing

For Bonnie, another essential element of self-love and self-care is holistic balance, a space in which her mind, body, and spirit are nurtured. She has learned that her body actually needs this balance in order to function optimally. Bonnie describes how she radiates with energy upon eating three meals and two snacks a day, exercising regularly, and setting aside time for prayer and meditation. She also enjoys traveling, and makes sure to work this into her busy schedule. This balanced routine provides her with the nutrition, movement, inner peace, and adventure that she needs in order to be in alignment with herself. Without nurturing this balance, Bonnie starts to detach from herself, confessing that “Emotionally, I’m out of sorts. My neurobiology is not good. My energy is not good.” Bonnie asserts that “If I’m putting garbage in, I just don’t feel good. So that gets me going into story about not being good to myself, and then it starts to spiral. So, emotionally, it puts me off the rails, if I’m not connecting well with my body”, through honouring her body’s need for balance.

Such a need is communicated to her through listening to her body’s wisdom. It is her body’s voice that keeps her on track, especially during times of busy-ness and stress, as it speaks loudly in order to get her attention. As Bonnie relays, “My body’s intelligence speaks to me. That voice has to speak loudly. If I get out of practice with mindfulness or my prayer or meditation, my body gets forgotten, too, because I’m not connected to my mind, my body, or my spiritual self. My spiritual self is connecting with my inside out; it’s my grounding place. And if I’m not doing that, then I’m not paying attention to my food.” Bonnie admits that, during times when she is knocked off balance, her relationship to food wavers, as sometimes she forgets to eat, and other times she may eat things that she normally would not. In addition, Bonnie relates that it’s the “same thing if I don’t exercise. If I don’t exercise or move my body for two

or three days, I forget my body. It's like, hey, I'm over here! And with connection, the body remembers. The body has such a wisdom. It can be so sad, and it hurts, and it can be joyous and free! I believe that the connection with the body, if we're tapped in and we're mindful, it tells us all kinds of messages, and it speaks. It's like, hey, mothership! I'm over here dancing! You're not having too much fun lately! It comes with such beautiful wisdom. It's fascinating! It speaks so beautifully, if we're present."

### Relating

Being a very sentient individual, Bonnie is also aware of the impact of other people on her own energy levels. Thus, to keep her own energy in balance, she knows that she must limit her own social involvement, to a certain extent, to honour her body's needs. Although she enjoys socializing, and is a very vivacious individual in social environments, Bonnie acknowledges that, she must set herself careful limits, out of respect for her body's balance. Bonnie, therefore, tries to avoid extreme social behaviour, admitting that "I don't like to be around a lot of excessiveness in anything. Drinking, food: I like to partake a little bit to a certain degree, but then I start to flood, and I need to leave, because it doesn't feel good for my body."

While keeping an eye on her energy levels, Bonnie affirms that that is the only way in which her body occupies her mind while socializing; otherwise she is very socially free with her body. While taking the effort to look nice, she is not overly consumed by her appearance, stating that, "Socially, when I'm really loving my body, I don't really care what size I am. I'm not attached so much to that. Sometimes, in my story, I go into, oh, you know, I really miss my size eight that could run 40K, but, overall, socially when I go out, I like to look nice, and stay connected to my body, and (be) mindful of my body, but it doesn't really generally affect me."

Appreciation of her body, as is, is evident in her words, as she realizes the changing nature of her body, and accepts that “My little body at ten is not the same as it is over fifty.” While she admits that this story of longing for her younger body does play in the background at times, all she has to do is “shift my story a little bit” and bring her back to the appreciation of who her body is now.

### Re-aligning

Although Bonnie knows what she must do in order to keep herself connected, she accepts that sometimes it is easy to teeter off this path. Upon encountering an experience which may potentially push her towards bodily disconnect, she makes the intention to honour the experience and try to not harm herself too much because of it, while working on finding that sense of alignment once again. Although very appreciative of the role that balance plays in her sense of bodily connection, Bonnie allows this balance to tip slightly at certain times, without being swept away by the powerful programming of her past.

Our interview takes place a few weeks following the Christmas holidays, and, thus, Bonnie is able to illustrate this understanding with a recently ongoing situation. As she shares, “I’m always mindfully aware when it’s Christmas, and people are being very indulgent. I will give myself lots of fun with food and entertainment. But I also have pretty strong constructs and ways of being around food.” She notes that, during the holiday season when indulgence is quite likely, she may gain some weight as a result – the “Christmas ten”, she laughs – and so, during this time, she gives herself extra grace, and allows herself to partake without restricting or beating herself up. Bonnie admits this is precisely the approach she is engaging now, in mid-January, as she attempts to re-discover the balance that was temporarily set aside during the party season. She affirms, with patience and grace, that “I am gently loving myself back into

wellness”.

Along this return to wellness, Bonnie acknowledges that the voice from her past sporadically re-surfaces to colour her mind with negative thoughts, asserting that “The old haunting script, it will rise up!” However, now that she is conscious of it and its reason for being there in the first place, she tries “not to let that voice have presence”. If such thoughts do infiltrate her mind, Bonnie has learned to pay mindful attention to her actions, in order to ensure that they are “in alignment with loving myself”. As she professes, “I just allow it (the voice) to be there, and I line my actions up differently, in a loving, kind way with my body.” Thus, while her mind may periodically taunt her, her body makes a strong effort to remain grounded in self-love. Bonnie confesses that this can sometimes be gruelling work, “like a salmon swimming upstream.” She says that, with all the messages that she has received from her family and society, remaining loving to her body is “like loving yourself against the tide. It’s like fighting the current and loving yourself” no matter what. Bonnie reveals that her love for her body is now stronger than ever, as she has “had longer to love it. Or not, depending on the day and the mind state.” And so the challenge ensues.

### Believing

This message of unconditional self-love, and the strength to see it through, is deeply rooted in spiritual belief. That she believes strongly in a higher power is clear in her words, as she views the world through a spiritual lens which honours the sacred connection between mind, body, and spirit. Bonnie professes that, spiritually, developing a connection with her body was re-affirming that intimacy that she has always had with her belief system, and re-fortifying her temple upon a sturdier foundation. Her thankfulness for her physicality is conveyed multiple times, as she expresses “such gratitude that this is my temple”, and harbours “tremendous

gratitude for the gift of life”, as well as for the ability to both live and give life through her body. As she exclaims, “I know it’s an amazing body that I’m in. I have daily gratitude for how freaking amazing my body is!” Her reverence of her body is evident in her words, as she enthuses that “as far as the world being embedded within . . . the incredible, unexplainable, magnificence of life is housed in this body that I’m carrying today and that will carry me through this time in life! I’m in awe!” Though this bodily appreciation is fluid and “gets knocked out of me depending on what’s going on and what’s spoken to me”, Bonnie deeply believes that it always has a way of returning.

### Unifying

Although connection with the body is a vital aspect to her, spiritually, Bonnie reveals that her understanding of the spirit transcends the physical self, proposing that when she sees “people who are in alignment and connection with themselves spiritually, I don’t even see their physical body. It just dissipates into the background, like a beautiful tree that I’m noticing.” Once connected to her own self, she is able to connect with others on a level that is able to be sensed rather than seen, knowing that we are all energetically connected. While appreciating the “incredible, magnificent, unexplainable understanding that every single one of our bodies are unique and individual, and there’s no other body like ours”, she accepts that “there is no separate self. We’re all of the human breed. There’s just no separateness.”

It is through developing the connection within one’s body and mind that one is able to appreciate the wholeness of the life experience. As Bonnie explains, “When you think about the body, and how much we love one another when we stay connected . . . my body, my soul, and my spirit are in love together, and then, when I’m loving my body, I can give out that love to others. And unless I am loving my body, then I’m not connected. Unless I’m connected deep

within, from the inside out, I can't connect and love others!" She appreciates that "how well I am taking care of myself, including the physical body, is a definite mirror of how I'm loving and taking care in other relationships, with my body, to my partner, to my children, to my peers, to my colleagues, to my friends, to my community. To how I feel connected in the global sense." Clearly, Bonnie respects the invisible union that connects us all, past the division of our bodies, and into the sharing of the same sacred spirit.

### Energizing

In addition to spiritual energy, another rich energy flows through Bonnie when she is nurturing a strong sense of body connection: sexual energy. As her own relationship with her body has fluctuated and flowed throughout the years, so, too, has her sexual energy and connectedness. Bonnie reports that her own sexual desire is strongly correlated to how well she is taking care of her body, and how close she is feeling towards her husband at a particular time. Having been disconnected sexually for so many years, due to her early wounding, Bonnie knows what it feels like to be not fully present during sex. Becoming united with the body, however, creates a new storyline of enjoyment and presence, as her sexual energy becomes invigorated once again. Bonnie shares that "If I'm loving it and treating it really well and being kind to my body, and feeling good in my relationship with my partner, (then) sex is amazing and it's beautiful for me now."

### Honouring

Beautiful is a fitting word for the interview, and the narrative told therein. By the end, with tears in her eyes, Bonnie expresses heartfelt gratitude, at herself for having made such a beautiful journey with her body, and at the topic itself, for keeping the body connection conversation alive and for giving words to what, for much of her life, has been kept silent. The

end of our interview invites Bonnie to a final reflection on her journey, and the process that has brought her to the acceptance, peace, and grace that she harbours today. In retrospect, Bonnie is able to perceive her body's journey as one of stops and starts, slight pauses and new beginnings. Bonnie has learned that her body relationship ebbs and flows, according to the situations in her life, and the way in which she chooses to treat her body because of such situations. She knows that it is all about choice. The choice to awaken to one's own power. The choice to prioritize self-care. The choice to get back on the path, having momentarily stepped off. The choice to celebrate and protect one's energy – emotionally, mentally, socially, physically, sexually, and spiritually. The choice to honour one's strength. The choice to accept bodily changes. And the choice to give gratitude for the sacredness of her body in all its forms throughout its journey.

Thank you, Bonnie, for honouring your body's wholeness and grace, and for mindfully nurturing your awe-inspiring connection between body, mind, and spirit.



## Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion

As explored in the method and methodology chapter, this research unfolds within the parameters of hermeneutic inquiry, a framework interested with the interpretations of lived experiences (Lane, 2005). I have chosen to situate my work within this framework with the intention of exploring and representing interpretations of the narratives of the journeying body. This methodological approach emphasizes the position occupied by the researcher in the recognition of pre-assumptions and previously-established ideas, as well as the emergence of new understandings, through a process of exploration, reflection, and enhanced contemplation (Chang, 2010).

Throughout this inquiry, I have illustrated the understandings and beliefs which initially propelled this study into motion. Rooted in my own personal experiences with all three central processes examined – disconnection, connection, and transition – I approached this research with a mixture of tacit knowing and a felt sense of the topic matter, coupled with a deep longing to understand the experiences on a more nuanced level. I had experienced a definite calling to this inquiry, as is fundamental to hermeneutic scholarship (Moules et al, 2014). Although having a multitude of colourful experiences and insights from my own journeying body from which to draw, my perspective was grounded in a sense of unknowingness and a curiosity to deepen my comprehension of the journeys of the body as experienced by other women; such curiosity is equally an integral element of the Gadamerian approach to hermeneutic inquiry (McCall, 2011)

The narratives presented in the previous chapter relay rich explorations of the dynamic transitions of the journeying body. Each of the women's stories portrays a rich, textured depiction of the journey of transition from, across, through, and between the bodily experiences of disconnection and connection. By hearing the stories of the women, exploring their experiences, and writing narrative texts based on their journeys, many contextualized insights

have emerged that encourage the contemplation of the journeying body through a variety of lived perspectives. The processing of my own narrative has also contributed to my growing understanding of the vibrant journeys of the body. These narratives in this inquiry are diverse and unique, yet shared meanings become evident across the landscape of the stories, as the women collectively breathe life into their lived bodily journeys, however they have interpreted such experiences to be. I believe that it is important to bring together some of the commonalities of the power of the experiences across the diversity of the women's experiences. This invites the conversation to move forward, to extend outwards from the individual to the collective, without the presumption of generalizing, to facilitate a deeper awareness of the constructs which I seek to explore.

The movements from the individual experiences to the collective experiences are essential in an exploration of the journeying body, as the body is at once an internal and external, or relational, experience. We each have a body and move throughout the world in our own individual physical space, and yet we are surrounded by, and intricately connected to, other bodies and conflicting perspectives of what it means to be embodied. The linkage between the internal and external experience of the body is conveyed through Zabriskie's (2006) words that:

The body is the locus of individuality and personal definition, the source of emotion, imagery, and also empathy. The body is also the common ground we share with all humans, as well as our means of relationship and communication. Our bodies link us to all other sentient beings in our time and era, and to all who have ever been embodied. They provide us with the vehicle through which the psyche expresses itself as we crawl, walk, and limp through the many phases of our incarnated lives, and give voice to the experience of being human. (p.76).

Thus is it that the body is more than purely the physical entity that we see: it is our link between the individual and the collective, the internal and external.

As professed in the introductory chapter, the conceptualization of the topic of this inquiry began in such a way. I allowed my questions to marinate internally for a time, and then welcomed them to flow externally to the wider sphere of the collectivity of women's stories, as I began to perceive the idea of bodily dis/connection as a shared theme in the lived body experience. Thus, the movement from the individual to the collective, and the discovery of commonalities between the experiences of women, is an integral element of this research. In identifying the shared experiences of the women, the power of the individual journey is given the space to shine, while connecting the women and illuminating broader insights across the collectivity of their narratives.

This analysis chapter seeks to discuss understandings that are revealed through the narratives of the journeying body in its movement towards connection. In the final segment of this inquiry, I will now engage in interpretation of the narratives of the journeying body, to open space for any new awareness that has emerged from honouring and celebrating the collectivity of the women's experiences. I will examine insights which I have cultivated from across the narratives, while engaging these insights in dialogue with the literature in this field. Certain shared understandings will also be presented. I have identified these understandings in interacting with the collection of narratives, engaging in back and forth dialogue with the transcripts and texts, as is an essential element of the hermeneutic process (Debesay, Naden, & Slettebo, 2008). In exploring the collectivity of the stories, I have chosen to integrate an academic and lyrical writing style in this section to capture the dynamic energy and movement of the women's narratives, and to honour their stories as living and evolving.

While there are multiple insights from the narratives that could be explored, for the purposes of this thesis I will now focus on three central understandings. Firstly, I will highlight the elements of hope, meaning, and empowerment that arise through the experiences of the journeying body; second, I will honour the complex fluctuations of the journeying body across the landscape of the women's stories; and lastly, I will celebrate the power of listening to and within the body in the transitioning between, through, and across lived bodily experiences. This inquiry will thereafter conclude with an examination of the literature in relation to these understandings, in addition to contemplation of future research in this field.

#### Emergence of hope, meaning, and empowerment

This inquiry encompasses an exploration of the self, expressed through an honouring of the dynamic experiences of the journeying body. Although grounded in bodily experiences, evolving from the collectivity of the women's stories is a shared awareness that such an exploration is not purely physical or somatic in nature. The women's stories speak of transformation, change, evolution, and growth across their complex selves of body, mind, spirit, relationships, and soul. While the women have each encountered contours of pain, trauma, confusion, frustration, dissociation, denial, impatience, and discomfort with their bodies, they have equally felt moments of deep self-awareness, emerging compassion and self-love, and a growing understanding of themselves as full embodied beings in relationship to others and to the world. The narratives of the journeying body are hence nuanced explorations of the women in the fullness of their selves, identities, and lives.

The simultaneously vivacious and tumultuous narratives of the journeying body may be viewed as inspirational on multiple levels. They seem to invite meanings that transcend the physical body experience and reach into the depths of the full self. What seems to arise from these powerful stories are shared feelings of hope, meaning, and empowerment that we, as

readers, could apply to our own lived experiences, however our journeys may unfold. Through the women's stories, we recognize that the potential for hope, meaning, and empowerment exists amidst the transitions of our journeying body, no matter how chaotic or unsettled our experiences may seem, and despite how deeply embedded we may perceive our disconnection to be.

One of the most hopeful, meaningful, and empowering understandings that seems to emerge from the narratives of the journeying body centers on the expansiveness of bodily experiences. As the narratives of the women suggest, somatic experiences vary in type and extent. The body experience overall, we may perceive, ultimately evolves beyond structure and definition. It is an expansive experience that encompasses unique shifts, changes, and movements that are often challenging to predict or explain. In contemplating the multi-dimensional narratives of the women, and in examining more intimately the expanse of my own bodily experiences, what becomes apparent is their resonance with postmodern understandings of inclusivity.

This perspective recognizes the subjectivity of experiences, the existence of multiple realities, and the neither here nor there approach to beingness (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007; Sumara, Davis, & Laidlaw, 2001). The narratives in this study voice the capacity that we have, as beings within a body, to hold the seemingly dualistic experiences of both disconnection and connection, within one body and self at the same time. Through the women's stories, we become aware that the experiences of bodily disconnection and connection do not exist in isolation: they are presented as co-existing experiences in simultaneous motion. These constructs are complementary components and neither appears to be more solid nor more significant than the other; rather, they co-dwell as part of the whole experience of being embodied.

This understanding of expansiveness and inclusivity invites several important insights about the experiences of disconnection and connection. Firstly arises the awareness that we may

never fully be disconnected from or connected with the body; we may be both, at the same time, in the same space, even if our attention may be diverted at times to one rather than the other. Equally inspired may be the understanding that moving across, between, and through our lived body experiences is, therefore, not only an accepted way of being within our body, it is implicit within the entire body experience. Furthermore, we may be invited to appreciate that, being as it is one element of an integrated relationship, connection with the body may exist without our conscious awareness; it may rather be a current that runs throughout our lives, undetected yet ever-present, overpowered perhaps by feelings of disconnection to which we may have become accustomed. Lastly emerges the insight that, as our bodily experiences are so expansive and powerful, they may extend beyond our own physical self to impact our being in and relationship to the world. In cultivating an awareness of these hopeful, meaningful, and empowering insights, we may enter into a more intimate and appreciative relationship with our soma; such is the power and strength of sharing the narratives of the journeying body.

I will now explore these elements of hope, meaning, and empowerment as they appear within the women's individual narratives. One of the most powerful depictions of the co-existing relationship between disconnection and connection is shared in the narrative of Renee. This particular narrative energizes the understanding that one may feel disconnected from the body while the journey towards connection has already begun, even if the journey unfolds as yet beyond one's perception or understanding. Renee's narrative reflects the insight that, though we may strive for alignment with our body without ever truly feeling it, bodily connection may be already there, waiting beneath the surface of our attention, steadily growing and building, intermingled within our experiences of disconnect. Dis/connection may thus exist one and the same. Our energy, however, may be primarily focused on the disconnect, as it is this which may erupt in our lives in devastating ways, demanding our attention. This narrative thereby facilitates

a more contextualized awareness of dis/connection as potentially co-existing within the entire experience of being embodied, supporting the post-modern conceptualization of the body as an integrated experience.

This contemplation of dualism versus co-existence is particularly salient for me, as it has significantly challenged my own pre-understandings and beliefs, as is invited by the process of hermeneutic inquiry. Prior to commencing this research, I held the personal understanding of bodily disconnection and connection as two distinct peaks, separated from one another by a vast canyon, across which one would only have to travel once before arriving in a blissful state of connectivity. Framed by this modernist perspective of the body's journeys, my inquiry began rooted in the impression and experience that bodily disconnect can only be recognized, and appreciated, in the space of connect: that one would never be able to identify the experience of disconnect if one had not already tasted its opposite, connection, and vice versa. It did not occur to me that these bodily experiences may co-exist, so strong was my perception of their separate, static nature.

This research, however, has aided in the expansion of my awareness of the shifting experiences of the journeying body, providing me with a much more encompassing perception, and the growing awareness that what I once believed to be a binary experience – either/or—is more fully in the context of lived experience a space inclusive of all experiences. My horizons have been transformed to understand disconnection and connection as co-existing experiences in motion, rather than prescribed, stationary states. I, therefore, believe that being in one experience does not necessarily exclude being in the other, leading to the recognition that an individual may feel both disconnected from and connected to her body at the same time. Thus is it that my perception that these experiences may be represented as one word – dis/connection: two integral processes that form the whole experience of being embodied. This understanding may offer

hope, meaning, and empowerment to those who may feel disconnection from their body and who, because of this, may believe that connection with the body is an elusive experience. The women's narratives promote the understanding that both may exist, and that the feeling of one does not necessarily have to negate the experience of the other.

Another element of hope, meaning, and empowerment that seems to be invited by the women's narratives is the celebration of the connection between our bodily experiences and our experiences beyond the physical self. Several of the stories suggest that our body's journeys may bring us to new ways of being, through developing an awareness and appreciation of our spirit and relationship to the external world. In exploring the spiritual entity of the body, Phillips (2005) speaks of the power of understanding the divinity of the body, and honouring its connectedness to the energy beyond. As she professes, our bodies:

are the means through which the Divine takes shape in this world, crucibles in which the raging blaze of spirit is transformed into luminous thought, radiant creations, enlightened action. We are the word made flesh, and through our bodies, we are continuing the creation of the universe, physically and metaphysically. It is not happening *to* us, but *through* us. (p. xi).

Her words seemingly come to life within many of the narratives of the journeying body. Indeed, my own awareness of the integration of the body and spirit has become heightened through bearing witness to the stories of the women. I was surprised by how integral the connection between body and spirit was for many of the women, and how deeply the presence of spirit was felt within the dialogues. My own horizons have thus been powerfully fused in relationship to my understanding of the spiritual nature of the body and the embodied presence of the spirit, both elements that I felt within my own narrative, and which were reflected in unique ways within each of the other narratives of the journeying body.



This awareness of spirituality emerges as a felt presence within most of the women's stories. In Holly's narrative, for example, we perceive a woman in the early process of spiritual inquiry, as she begins to build a connecting relationship between her body, mind, and spirit. Her challenging bodymind experiences have given root to a more nuanced, appreciative, and curious perspective of the self beyond the purely physical and mental realms. A new awareness surfaces within Holly; she has started to conceptualize her physical form not only as the vehicle with which she moves through the world, but also as a vessel for energy and spirit. With the births of her twins, Holly's spiritually-grounded perspective of her body has deepened further, as she now expresses an expanded appreciation of her body as the home of her children during her pregnancy, as well as her babies' source of nourishment and protection. Becoming grounded within her own bodily experiences has offered Holly the rooting, it seems, from which to look beyond and to examine curiously other aspects of the self – spiritually and relationally -- that are entering her awareness.

The connection between body-mind-spirit is similarly reflected in the narrative of Robyn, for whom relationship with spirit forms the primary foundation of connection with all aspects of the self. Robyn's narrative voices the shifting physical and mental experiences of a woman whose spiritual beliefs seem unwavering, providing an anchor for the fluctuations that may occur within her body and mind. Through her story, we perceive the strength of spiritual connection as a grounding point for other types of connection and the understanding that we, as embodied beings, are part of a natural intelligence that cannot be fully known or understood; it may simply be felt and appreciated. In connecting with the spirit, Robyn shares, we connect with a force that is beyond the physical and, yet, that contains the physical and is deeply in relationship to the physical; thus, it is a connection that is both above, and within. An appreciation of the sacredness of the body appears at many times in her narrative, affirming Robyn's perspective of the body

and spirit as being undeniably in relationship, and thereby potentially providing further hope, meaning, and empowerment to the experiences of the journeying body.

The narrative of Bonnie likewise navigates the interactions between the body, mind, and spirit, placing significant emphasis on the power of unity between the three. Similar to Robyn, Bonnie seems to harbour a strong spiritual foundation, stemming from her religious upbringing, and she is highly appreciative of the presence and purpose of spirit within her life. For Bonnie, an optimal experience with the body happens within an honouring of her spirit. As her narrative relays, it is the times when she is most honouring of her own self as a spiritual being that she feels the most grounded within her bodily self. In meditating and praying, for example, she further enters into an intimate relationship with her full self: body, mind, and spirit. Disconnect from her spirit thus tends to incite a detachment from the trilogy of mind-body-spirit that she so mindfully aims to sustain. Through Bonnie's narrative, we come to view the body not only as a vessel or grounding place for spiritual energy; it also becomes portrayed as an extension or unfolding of the spirit.

An understanding of expansion beyond the self is equally visible in Sarah's narrative. Although Sarah considered herself to be a spiritual person prior to her diagnosis, believing in the power of the universe and its energies, she had never paused to contemplate the connection between her physical, mental, and spiritual selves, as she had never had a reason to think about them as separate units before. When her body was suddenly ripped out of the balance of mind, body, and spirit, by way of her physical illness, the other pieces of the unity were impacted as well, thus seemingly separating her from the way of being which she had always known, and forcing her to contemplate herself and her body from a different perspective. From this position, she became aware of the intricate relationship that had formerly existed between her body, soul, and mind, and she became determined to bring these parts of the self into union, in a new space

of connection. Her seemingly contradictory situation – believing in the connection between body and spirit without actually consciously contemplating it, and, therefore, potentially taking it for granted -- elucidates another nuanced meaning of the experiences of the journeying body, further showcasing their expansiveness. Sarah’s narrative inspires the insight that, in the absence of brokenness, one may not view the component parts of a whole, and that, in some cases, it may be in the felt experience of breaking down or apart that one may be able to re-connect the scattered pieces of the whole-- body, mind, and spirit -- having viewed them in their entirety.

The women’s narratives appear to affirm that there is genuine hope, meaning, and empowerment that can arise through the experiences of the journeying body, as convoluted or turbulent as some bodily experiences may seem. An expansive perspective of the body experience opens the space for newfound awareness of the integration of all experiences that we may have through and with our bodies, and the relationship with our body that may shift and evolve over the course of our lives. It also opens space for new ways of thinking, being, and relating to what may lie beyond our own physical and mental selves, bringing us into an expansive relationship with “the body of the world” (Enslar, 2013, p.7) in which our own body experiences take place.

#### Fluctuations of the body

The second understanding that has emerged through my reflections on the collectivity of the narratives centers on the complex and chaotic fluctuations of the journeying body that seem readily apparent in the women’s experiences. This is one of the most prominent themes portrayed by each of the women’s stories, that of the changing and shifting nature of their lived body experiences. Here I seek both to explore and celebrate the transitory experience of the body, bringing light to the postmodern perspective of the body in flux, moving continuously between experiences of disconnect and connect, rather than being firmly grounded in either.

Identifying the fluctuating facility of the body gives rise to an evolving understanding that the transitions of the journeying body are not necessarily smooth, neatly contained, one-way processes to be clearly navigated and defined, but that they may actually be messy, disjointed, multi-directional shifts that are often challenging to define.

A central insight from this research emphasizes the fluctuation of the lived body experience, and the awareness that neither disconnection, connection, nor transition are static states, but that they appear to be interconnected, dynamic, messy, and open to movement. As the body exists organically in a space of motion and transition, individuals may feel shifts and changes within their body experience at any time for a multitude of reasons, as invited by the women's stories. This movement may be sudden or gradual, chaotic or flowing, back and forth erratically, back and forth in one simple movement, and more. Body transitions may thus be perceived as highly subjective experiences which are most comprehensively viewed through a postmodern lens that honours the fluctuations of the body and respects its tendency to shift throughout our lived experiences. The insights that emerge from this research thereby help redefine our understanding of transition from a modern to a postmodern notion.

The narratives of the women in this study speak of the changing and shifting experiences of the journeying body, revealing the dynamic process of transition from multiple perspectives. The narratives each demonstrate the ability of the body to fluctuate – often, and sometimes rapidly –between and across experiences of disconnection and connection, not resting long in either space, but shifting in its own rhythm back and forth in reaction or response to the dynamics of the women's lived experiences. Five of the narratives, in addition to my own, reveal a body in constant motion, describing swinging motions between felt extremes of thought, emotion, and behaviour. Such oscillation is manifested within the women's lived physical and mental experiences in diverse ways, surfacing in the forms of eating disorders, anxiety,

depression, cycles in mood, distorted thinking, and inconsistent feelings of self-worth, to name a few. The experiences of the women, myself included, do not flow smoothly or fluidly between spaces of disconnection and connection; they are instead often jagged and fragmented journeys, veering back and forth wildly and powerfully, knocking us off balance in our lives. Many of the experiences contain frenzied energy, following a rhythm that appears to be largely unpredictable and uneven. Each of the narratives depicts the chaos that arises through the often tumultuous and tangly lived bodily journeys, and facilitate an acceptance of the fluctuations of the journeying body as foundational in the experience of embodiment.

Such shifting is apparent in several of the women's stories, including that of Katrina, whose narrative expresses her quest for an anchor in between extremes of eating behaviours and moods. Through Katrina's words, we witness a vivid interplay between the body and mind, and erratic patterns of cycling that have provided her physical and mental experiences with momentum. Her story does not prioritize the body over the mind, or vice versa; her challenges are rooted in both aspects of the self. In reading Katrina's words, it seems evident that many of her life experiences have unfolded within the parameters of a turbulent relationship with the full self. The fluctuations of her relationship with her body seem to have been linked significantly with shifts on multiple levels.

Katrina's search for equilibrium between the body and mind is hence presented as doubly complex, as she has shifted erratically between nuanced extremes of both a physical and psychological nature. The pages of her narrative seem to describe the jagged journey of an individual who has transitioned between and across experiences of bodily dis/connect since a young age. Yet her story equally speaks of an incredibly empowered and self-aware woman whose challenges continue to be softened and healed by the mindful nurturing of a conscious connection with her emotional and mental self, thus providing further support to the postmodern

understanding of expansiveness and inclusivity that frames this inquiry.

Further evidence of evolving equilibrium is evident in Holly's narrative. A swinging momentum is particularly perceptible in this narrative, as Holly clearly identifies the flux of relationship with her own body while navigating the experience of eating disordered behaviour and recovery. Through her story, we come to understand the experience of the body as an experience of motion, moving and shifting along a non-linear continuum of connectivity. Holly highlights the fluctuation of her own journeys, most especially in the early days of transitioning towards a sense of connection with her body, as she oscillated between an old body-centric worldview, deeply entrenched within her way of thinking and being, and a new burgeoning perspective of herself through an empowering lens of body awareness and appreciation. Holly perceives the lack of balance between her body and mind at that time, and the persistent inner desire to control her inner experiences, rather than permitting her body to flow organically and to regain its own natural experience of homeostasis. Her narrative highlights the capacity of the body to not only shift, but to encounter other movements that may foster rest and support a space of potential equilibrium between extremes.

In addition to such erratic motion, the narratives of the journeying body alternately suggest that the transitions of the body may not always be as continuous or agitated. Sarah's narrative, in particular, speaks of transitioning in one direction, without any perceived oscillations between extremes. Her story explores two central shifts of her journeying body: one, directly and quickly thrown in the direction of disconnection and a sense of betrayal at the time of her diagnosis of breast cancer, after having lovingly nurtured a strong relationship with her body throughout her life; and two, diligently and patiently in the direction of a new experience of connection, which at the time of our interview, was slowly building. This narrative hence proposes a new way of perceiving the journeying body, as one that is felt to be moving in a

perhaps steady direction towards a newness and wholeness of body, mind, and self, rather than shifting back and forth in unrelenting motion.

Sarah's narrative is unique in its telling, and invites a potential new groove of understanding in this research. Her story facilitates a contextualized examination not only of the potential bi-directional transitioning of the journeying body; it also identifies the link between inner and outer experiences of the body: how the inner body experience may be shifted by a force seemingly outside of one's power, and how the body grapples to create a new sense of footing after being propelled off balance unexpectedly. While we have normative understandings of what is internal and external, and are able to distinguish between experiences of the inner body system and experiences of the world around us, an exploration of Sarah's meaningful journey encourages more nuanced subtleties of understanding the relationship between the two, and invites consideration of how shifts from beyond one's conceptual awareness – in her case, cancer – may have the ability to influence shifts within the inner body system.

One of the richnesses of hermeneutics is exploring the messy and difficult aspects of lived experiences (Jardine, 1992), enabling us to move the conversation forward and to claim new ways of understanding. Sarah's narrative has helped guide this exploration of the messiness and complexity of lived experiences by linking the shifting inner experiences of her body with a foreign movement that was forced upon her, without choice or consent, thus adding further depth and meaning to the fluctuating experiences of her journeying body. Her narrative appears to show that, while cancer becomes an embodied experience – that is, of and within the physical container of the body – it emerges from within the body space in a foreign and disjointed manner, and has the ability to incite disembodiment from the inside out.

As the women's narratives reveal, fluctuation with the body – as with the co-existence of dis/connection – seem to be an integral element of the body experience. The body is not meant

to be a static being, stationary and unweathered by the challenges and changes of life. It is a dynamic being of energy, flexibility, and motion, and it thus has the capacity to alter, shift, and transition in non-linear movement, a feature that is powerfully captured by the narratives of the journeying body.

### Listening to and within the body

The final understanding to be explored in this analysis centers on the act of listening to and within the body. Listening to/within the body is of a personal nature: we do this in interaction with our body. Being as it is such an intimate experience, it has the potential to invite us into a new way of perceiving the integration between the different aspects of the self, most particularly in the context of the body and mind. What the body vocalizes -- through its multiple means of feelings, instincts, sensations, and somatic reactions, to name a few -- the mind may interpret, through a lens of mindfulness and somatic awareness (Csepregi, 2006; Enghauser, 2007; Finlay, 2006; Gendlin, 1978; Kabat-Zinn, 2009; Levine, 1997; Panhofer & Payne, 2011; Phillips, 2005; Phillips, 2011; Shapiro, 2002; Shapiro, 2006; Zabriskie, 2006).

Connecting with the body through listening to its messages can thus facilitate dialogue and connection of the body and mind, potentially bridging any perceived gap between the parts of the whole, as outlined in the literature review, and welcoming us further into the fullness of our embodied experience. Developing an awareness of the implicit communication of the body may inspire an appreciation of its wisdom and power. In becoming aware of the body's voices, we may learn to recognize and trust in the deep inner knowing of our body, which may help to strengthen our understanding of the body as being more than purely physical. It thus may encourage us to re-frame our conceptualization of our body, inviting us further into a grounded and accepting relationship with it.



Central to the act of listening to the body is often an understanding that the body carries an inner source of wisdom or knowledge that may speak in diverse ways and for unique purposes. The narratives of the journeying body offer many varied examples of the speaking of the body's voices, through the forms of feelings, intuition, energy, felt sense, and instincts, as will soon be discussed. As articulated in the literature, additionally vital to the experience of listening to and within the body is that understanding that, being attuned to the implicit messaging of the body system permits us access to an intelligence that comes from within and that positions us directly within our body's experiences.

Becoming aware of the body's communication, therefore, may inspire an important shift in the body experience. It represents a move from denying or ignoring the body's messages, which the narratives suggest are intertwined with experiences of disconnection, towards a space of honouring the body as a dynamic and knowledgeable living system. I feel that this shift is an essential element in the exploration of the experiences of the journeying body, as it invites a conceptualization of the body from a subjective stance, rather than from an objectified external positioning. I propose that the self-oriented experience of listening to the body – and honouring its messages -- has the potential capacity to return power and agency to an individual, which may have been lost or taken from her, or which may be hidden beneath internalized layers of externalized societal messaging. Being mindful of the inner power of her body may thus enable a woman to step back into her own inner space by becoming attuned to her own positioning and by feeling grounded within her own self.

As the narratives of the women relay, there exist many openings to the experience of somatic listening. I will now explore the various means through which the journeying bodies in this inquiry have voiced their own needs, desires, and messages. The narratives suggest that listening to and within the body may be something that we do often without full conscious

awareness; it may also be an act of conscious choice or deliberation. Sarah's narrative speaks of the latter -- applied somatic listening through perceived necessity -- as it vocalizes the physical and emotional challenges of a woman for whom the body became the enemy following an unexpected cancer diagnosis. Conceptually detaching from her physicality and identity as a consequence of her abrupt diagnosis, Sarah nonetheless demonstrated an incredible amount of body attentiveness and respect while in treatment and recovery. Although seemingly divided from her body and not understanding why it would "turn" on her without warning, Sarah was highly receptive of her physical needs and took care of her body in an often mechanical, yet mindful, manner. Her ability to connect with her body even amidst such significant perceived separation may have been fostered by the loving and nurturing relationship that she had enjoyed with her body over the years, coming to the surface in a new light.

Another intriguing expression of the somatic voice is conveyed in Bonnie's narrative in the form of energy. Her story describes the energetic messages that Bonnie's body transmits as a means of maintaining wellness. Through her narrative emerges an acknowledgement of the power of her body both to generate and contain energy, and an appreciation of the ability of her body to engage this energy in meaningful ways. Equally apparent is an awareness of the need for Bonnie to respect the parameters of her body's energy in order to stay balanced in mind, body, and spirit, and to adjust her activity level in respect to the boundaries of her energetic system. For Bonnie, it would seem as though the body serves not only as the creator and container of energy, but also as an energetic barometer that helps to keep each part of her whole self in connection. In being mindful of the body's powerful capacity as an energetic vehicle and vessel, Bonnie engages her body's inner knowing as an essential act of self-care. Listening to the body is thus portrayed in her narrative as being central not only to developing a connection between the body and mind, but as an integral element in maintaining holistic wellness.

An awareness of the body's implicit intelligence is alive in several of the other narratives as well. Renee, for example, powerfully describes the intuitive urge that provoked her to sleep with a hammer on the night that she was attacked by a stranger. Robyn beautifully presents the felt sense that she experienced at the birth of her third son, when she was certain that he was about to be born, despite the nurses trying to convince her otherwise. Similarly, Holly confidently acknowledges the trust that she has nurtured in relation with her body, trusting deeply that she is actively in the process of healing and that, despite whatever voices may cloud her mind from time to time, her body is ultimately guiding her in a positive direction. In addition, Katrina's narrative bravely and vulnerably voices her transition towards a deepened relationship with her emotions, as she consciously cultivates respect for her body's emotional messengers. Each of these stories contain elements of potential disempowerment, fear, or uncertainty, combined with an awareness of intuition, internal knowing, and trust. In each of these examples, it is the dialogue between the body and mind which has inspired the women to make changes within their own situation or environment in order to best take care of themselves, for matters of health, safety, and wellbeing.

The narratives of the body suggest that, through listening to the body, and respecting its voice, we are thus able to re-frame our understanding of how and what the body represents. In Sarah's situation, her perspective of the body has shifted from being the ultimate betrayer to the vehicle through which wellness once again thrives. For Bonnie, the body serves as an indicator of energy, allowing her to be in the world fully and completely at times, and reminding her at other times to prioritize self-care. In Renee's case, the body has acted as an alarm, protecting her safety; for Robyn, it has shown evidence of a tacit maternal knowing, as well as an implicit connection with her son and his own body's experiences. In Holly's situation, the body continues to provide an anchor that keeps her from getting entangled in mental distortions or negative self-

talk. For Katrina, the body provides the medium through which her emotions speak, indicating in which areas of her life her attention needs to flow. Through developing an awareness of the voice of the body, and in listening to it, re-framing of the body can occur. The body becomes perceived as so much more than the physical, providing a link to an inner knowing that may be simultaneously protective, intelligent, and trustworthy.

### Exploration of the literature

In the literature review, I highlighted multiple understandings that are significant in the exploration of the lived body experience, particularly in the context of women. After delving further into the narratives of the journeying body, my awareness has expanded and evolved to accommodate new growths of understanding. Bearing witness to the experiences of the women has facilitated a shifting of the knowledge that I brought with me to this study. This research has succeeded in strengthening my appreciation of the lived body experiences of women, both individually and collectively. It has also encouraged me to cultivate a more contextualized perspective of the lived experiences of women in the richness of their identities as complex beings. I feel that this inquiry may similarly deepen the literature existing in the area of somatics, by adding a rich celebratory perspective of the messiness of the experiences of the journeying body. As I have observed, there exists a need within the literature for research that more extensively highlights, honours, and respects the messiness of the lived experiences of women, not only in the context of the body, but in the experience of the entire self.

I propose that the beautifully chaotic nature of the journeying body is perhaps one of the most meaningful and transformational insights inspired by this inquiry. The juxtaposition of the roots of these two words -- beautiful and chaos -- mirrors the co-existence of dis/connect, as previously explored, and the understanding that, while they are seemingly different, together they form significant pieces of the whole. The body experience is revealed to integrate

beautiful and chaotic movements and experiences, and it is deeply meaningful in its expansive, inclusive, and messy nature. This appreciation of the body experience aligns well with hermeneutic inquiry, which supports and encourages the messiness and complexity of lived experiences. As Kinsella (2006) asserts, “Hermeneutics embraces ambiguity” (p.9); hence, a hermeneutic approach to the journeying body respects the multi-faceted nature of its experiences. Hermeneutic scholarship believes in bringing topics back into their complexity: the “restoring of life to its original difficulty”, as Jardine (1992) has proclaimed. Through engaging in this research, I have discovered that the experiences of the journeying body are often highly ambiguous and difficult, and, thus, an open vessel such as the one offered by hermeneutics is an effective means of holding and appreciating their fullness.

The understanding of the beautifully chaotic experience of the body has been present at each step of the research journey, before the collection of the data was even contemplated. Because of the tumultuous nature of my own journeying body, and my appreciation of my body’s life story, this notion was embedded within my own thoughts and perspectives, forming the grounding place from where this study began. I have long perceived the body experience to be one of shifts and changes, as that is what I have known. Likewise, I have felt that bodily experiences comprise mystery, beauty, and meaning, and, indeed, this is precisely what the narratives of the journeying body have revealed.

What has shifted significantly for me now, in approaching the end of this present inquiry, is my understanding of just how significant the concept of transition is in the experiences of the journeying body. Earlier in this research process, I had not placed as much focus on the experience of transition as I had on the other key constructs that this inquiry has sought to explore – the experiences of disconnection and connection -- believing that it was within the experiences of dis/connection that one would locate the mystery, beauty, and meaning that I was

seeking. As previously shared, I had previously considered the transition piece to be one-directional and simple, a vast canyon linking two seemingly dualistic peaks of what I perceived to be conflicting experiences. Transition, was, therefore, in my mind, a necessary movement connecting the two elements that most stimulated my intrigue. In this way, the construct of transition may actually be perceived as a binary, linking here with there. My perception and appreciation have now expanded, however, to take in fully the importance of the transition, and the essential role that it plays in all experiences of the journeying body. I now recognize the complexities and expansiveness of the transitions of the body, and ascertain that it is mostly in a space of transition that we live our lives within our bodies, shifting back, forth, across, through, and in between experiences of dis/connect. As this inquiry has emphasized, this is not a linear motion, but rather an energetic movement of stops, turns, pauses, twists, jumps, and, at times, stillness and calm (Roth, 1997; Roth, 1998).

As this inquiry winds to an end, I feel a gentle movement beyond what may be conceptualized as the binary construct of transition in the direction of a word that more fully honours the spaces between that this research has brought to light. Emerging from this inquiry is thus an honouring of the in-between moments and liminal spaces and dwellings that are, as with the constructs of disconnection and connection, seemingly embedded within the body experience. The movements of the body thus become positioned not only as a means of linkage of the processes of dis/connection; they are the space in which transformation is fostered, and are, therefore, deeply significant in and of themselves. It is in the movement between, across, and through somatic experiences that we perceive, in the narratives of the journeying body, the greater fullness of the women in relationship to their bodies, minds, spirits, souls, loved ones, and world. Examining the ever-present and ongoing fluctuations of their lived experiences, we may more clearly view their complexities, colours, challenges, and contours, through a lens of

somatic awareness and appreciation. The transitions shared within their stories reflect the understanding as offered by Gardner (2008) that movement is “experienced and conceptualized as a complex dance of opportunity and struggle” (p. 14). The dichotomy of movement is further reflected in the words of Gardner (2008) both “as that which gives life, freedom, and the opportunity to create connections that transform us, others, and our world” (p. 14), as well as “that which overwhelms, dislocates, brings disequilibrium, or leaves us behind” ( p.14). Each of these acclaims is powerfully visible in the narratives of the journeying body.

In my expanding recognition of the predominance, purpose, and power of the transition, my awareness of the need for acceptance of the body’s dynamic shifts and changes have been profoundly heightened. This inquiry encourages, I believe, a need to allow such body-and-self evolution to unfold within its own space and energy, without pathologizing it, internalizing it, or making it seem as though it is negative and outside of the norm. As this research supports, developing a deeper and more connected relationship with the body necessitates an openness to its messiness and chaos, as well as an acceptance of the shades of struggle and opportunity (Gardner, 2008) that are seemingly integrated within the body experience.

To make the shifting nature of the body explicit through my hermeneutic exploration of the journeying body and its greater kinship with postmodern as opposed to binary perspectives, I will now engage in dialogue with literature that explores the experiences of the journeying body in the context of the body’s rhythms, as articulated by Roth. Gabrielle Roth’s exploration of the Five Rhythms is engaged to inform my ongoing understanding of bodily transitions, movements, and fluctuations. Her perspective is captivated by, and deeply curious and attentive to, the experiences of the journeying body in its changing motion, and her focus on the rhythms of the body may enrich our understanding of the transitions that the body experiences. I have chosen to highlight the insights of Roth as I appreciate her articulation of the depth and breadth

of postmodern fluctuation in the body, in the context of what she conceptualizes as the body's natural energetic rhythms. Roth offers an understanding that is both body-based and language-based, putting into words the experiences of the body, and giving life and motion to what I believe are key constructions of the bodily experience: disconnection, connection, and transition. This discussion of Roth's ideas begins by examining her interpretation of the rhythms as a whole, leading into a nuanced exploration of two certain rhythms which are alive within each of the narratives of the journeying body shared in this inquiry.

Firstly I begin with an examination of the foundation of Roth's work: the rhythms of the body. Roth (1998) outlines five rhythms that are evident in our bodily experiences: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical, and stillness. These rhythms capture the motion of the body throughout the lifespan along a landscape of dynamic and differing energetic patterns. Each of these movements is important and appears in various capacities in response to a multitude of factors and experiences in an individual's life. While initially conceived in the context of ecstatic dance, these energetic rhythms exist in all that we do, every action that we take, manifesting in the various ways that we navigate the world through our body.

As Roth (1997) has expressed, "the five rhythms are a map to everywhere you want to go, on all planes of consciousness – inner and outer, forward and back, physical, emotional, and intellectual. They are markers on the way back to a real self, a vulnerable, wild, passionate, instinctive self" (p. 194). She has described the rhythms as "a state of being; an outrageous world of deep inner teachings on the nature of life and love, birth and death, art and God" (Roth, 1997, p. 37). Although such language engages a modernist approach, in speaking of a self that is "real" or "true", I do believe that Roth's conceptualization of the five rhythms is postmodern in nature and encompasses well the shifting energy of the body in transition.



I will now introduce the five rhythms, which will lead into a more detailed exploration of those rhythms that I believe are evident within the stories of the women in this study. Roth (1997) has portrayed the five rhythms of the body in the following way:

In flowing you discover yourself. In staccato you define yourself. Chaos helps you dissolve yourself, so you don't end up fixed and rigid in the self you discovered and defined. Lyrical inspires you to devote yourself to digging deep into the unique expression of your energy. And stillness allows you to disappear in the big energy that holds us all so you can start the whole process over again. (p. 194).

Imagining such rhythms as elements of ecstatic dance, we may envision a lively showcase of changes, shifts, turns, and movements, in which the body is always in energetic motion. Some energies may be slow and seemingly effortless, while others require more stamina, processing, attention, and moving. The three rhythms of flowing, lyrical, and stillness create an air of calming, centering, and hope, as an individual engages in a process of self-discovery, devotion, new beginnings, and acceptance, while within the rhythms of staccato and chaos we perceive change, transformation, awareness, and growth (Roth, 1997; Roth, 1998).

Of the five rhythms, it is the presence of these latter two that I implicitly feel within the narratives of the journeying body. Both of these rhythms align well with the frenzied, vibrant movements of the journeying bodies, as they oscillate, swing, and transition back and forth between, across, and through experiences of disconnection and connection. While the women's narratives also share experiences of the rhythms of flowing, lyrical, and stillness, it is the more action-driven rhythms of staccato and chaos that are predominantly pronounced in their stories. In the instances when the lyrical and still rhythms arise, it is at these moments when the women identify feeling a deeper sense of connection with their body. It is important to recognize that, while the women's bodily stories seem to reflect the staccato and chaotic rhythms, the

women may also carry other stories not conveyed in this thesis that strongly resonate with the other rhythms. Roth's insights help give shape and dialogue to the fluctuating experiences of the journeying body; yet within the postmodern view there may likely be additional rhythms to explore and equally make visible, which could perhaps lead to future research in this area.

In exploring the shifting nature of the journeying body, what becomes apparent is that the body exists in energetic motion: it does not reside in either a space of disconnection or connection, but rather moves, shifts, and changes. This understanding is well-articulated in this thesis as one of the primary understandings derived from an exploration of the lived body experience and it finds clear resonance within Roth's words. To honour such integral movement, Roth (1998) has encouraged a spirit of acceptance. The challenge, in her words, "is to become conscious of these rhythms, to truly experience them, to enter into them. We have to learn to know what rhythm we're in, how to ride with it, how to shift . . . we need to discover what rhythm predominates in us . . . we need to tune into the undulating rhythms of our days, our weeks, our months, our years" (p. 34).

As such, in this research, transitions may be re-conceptualized within a postmodern view, such as the one proposed by Bauman (2000), which may honour the expansiveness and complexities of the journeying body's experiences. Through a postmodern lens, bodily disconnection and connection may be appreciated as co-existing and inclusive processes along a non-linear continuum of connectivity, messiness and movement may be celebrated, and fluctuations and liminal spaces may be perceived as integral elements of the body experience. The bodily shifting may be understood as being in tandem or co-relation with the shifting mind, highlighting the mind and body connection and the term now often used, *bodymind*, to relay this profound relationality (Ressler, 2009; Shapiro, 2002; Shapiro, 2006).

### Integrating

As this present inquiry comes to a close, I am beginning to contemplate where the curiosity that initially propelled this research into motion may next lead. The narratives of the journeying body, in conjunction with the literature that has fed this research, have inspired interest in other areas of scholarship that seemingly extend onwards from this current inquiry. I am particularly interested, moving forward, in exploring literature in the field of proprioception, to investigate how our bodies extend beyond our physical skin and connect us with the external world (Blakeslee & Blakeslee, 2007; Macaluso & Maravita, 2010; Stamenov, 2005). I am also deeply curious about the experience of bodies from a variety of diverse perspectives not represented in this study, including those of different abilities, gender identities and expressions, and ages.

In addition, I am interested in becoming more familiar with ecofeminist inquiry to understand more fully our inherent connection with the Earth, and how this may be reflected within our internal and external lived experiences (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Burns, 2008; Field, 2000; Gaard, 2010; Glazebrook, 2002; Griffin, 1989; Mack-Canty, 2004; McWeeny, 2014; Moore, 2008; Phillips & Rumens, 2016; Sydee & Beder, 2001; Twine, 2001; Warren, 2000). Beginning this present research, I had not contemplated engaging an ecofeminist framework. However, I now believe that ecofeminism may be a suitable container to hold the strengths, challenges, and messiness of the lived body experience. Engaging this lens may facilitate an expansion of my understanding between the individual and collective, which may add further textured meaning to the exploration of embodiment. Several branches of contemplation thereby emerge from this study, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the body experience from a variety of lived perspectives.

In contemplating the findings of this inquiry, it is important to remember that I have only spoken to individuals for whom dis/connection is an identified experience. The women in this study have each experienced their own unique journey back, forth, across, and between dis/connection; they readily understood what it was that was meant by this topic when I had initially proposed it to them in the early stages of this research process. I understand that not everybody experiences such body transitions in the same manner, and that, for many people, the very concepts of dis/connection could be challenging to identify or define. Thus, the understandings explored in this analysis may or may not be applicable to individuals with other lived bodily experiences, but like the aims of hermeneutics offer an extension of the current conversation.

It is equally important to highlight the potential limitations of this research: primarily its lack of diversity. The women who participated in this study all Caucasian, able-bodied, and educated past the secondary level. They each come from the east coast of Canada, and reside currently in or around the same city. Their dominant language is English, and while their ages vary slightly, they largely represent a similar demographic, with ages ranging from roughly 30-50. I have no knowledge as to which or any sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression they self-identity, nor am I aware of the their socio-economic statuses, as these concepts were not mentioned during our dialogue. However, I do acknowledge that the women appear to have many similarities. This was not a conscious decision, as I would have been very open to hearing the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds. In future research, I would be interested in exploring such experiences with people from different ethnicities, ages, abilities, education levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and gender experiences. I aim to continue my exploration of the journeying body in more encompassing and inclusive research in the future.

## Returning

The body experience is a dynamic journey that has as its very foundation the nuanced experiences of movement and fluctuation. Embedded within this experience is the presence of the beautifully chaotic: the ruptures that emerge amidst the calm, and the flow of mysterious and meaningful energy that keeps us in motion and dialogue with our bodily self. Within the experience of being embodied is similarly an awareness of the body's fullness: its detachments, alignments, shifts, complexities, and energies. What began in this research as an exploration of the movement towards connection with the body now exists as an honouring of the body in its entirety – a recognition of the integration of connection, disconnection, and transition -- and an appreciation of the movements and in between spaces that make up the landscape of the experiences of the journeying body.

Many ideas have shifted through the course of this inquiry. Through the powerful narratives of the women, a deeply nuanced meaning arises that portrays connection not as the ultimate goal – the pinnacle or peak – as I had previously conceptualized, nor does it convey disconnection as a space from which one must desire to leave; rather, what has surfaced through this research is an empowering and encompassing vision of the whole person, in messiness and complexity, amongst each of the colours and contours of the full body experience. Emerging from this analysis is a more expansive awareness that there is not a magical place in time and space in which connection with the body is guaranteed, nor is there the obligation for a disconnected body to remain in a space of disconnection. The body experience is a continual journey of fluctuation, against and within an ongoing backdrop of complexity and challenge. The journeying body is always in transition, moving, expanding, growing, evolving, seeking. It is in the acceptance of this messiness, fullness, and evolution that the mystery, beauty, and meaning of the experiences of the journeying body may seem to come most fully to light. We live in our

bodies, yet sometimes seek to distance ourselves from our body experiences, such as they may be difficult or confusing to navigate or comprehend. Yet it is in cultivating awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of the body – amidst its myriad of fluctuating experiences – that we may be able to perceive the depth of its wisdom, courage, and strength, and to exist fully in the world as embodied beings. My research invites a welcoming to engage and honour the fullness of our body experience.

### Engaging this research

This inquiry now concludes with an examination of its potential impact. The power of this inquiry is significant. Not only has this research shone light on unique experiences of the journeying body, it has revealed shared meanings which may inform the collective understanding of the lived experiences of women. The pages of this thesis showcase the rich lives of women experiencing a multitude of personal issues, losses, illnesses, traumas, and conflicts. Within some of the stories, dis/connection with the body is clearly perceived, such as in the experiences of eating disorders and breast cancer, for example. Within others, dis/connection with the body may be viewed from a peripheral view: although perhaps not the primary catalyst to the women's shifting experiences, certainly a felt presence within their lives. What becomes evident through this research is the integration of the body within the whole person; the understanding that experiences of and within the body are not simply somatic or physical in nature, but that the stories of the body may infiltrate to the stories of who we are as full and complex people.

This research may be engaged individually, by those who desire to understand more fully their own lived body realities. It may equally be engaged in the external realm, by policy makers, therapists, and other professionals who seek an expanded understanding of the body experience, particularly in the context of women. This inquiry also adds to the rich literature that exists in the field of somatics, providing a deep awareness of the experiences of the journeying

body through an honouring and celebratory lens, through both an internal and external exploration of disconnection, connection, and transition.

Of particular importance is the relevance of this inquiry to the field of counselling psychology. Its empowering and holistic lens make this inquiry potentially relevant to practitioners and clients in diverse contexts. Themes of body dis/connection and transitions may have implications for the practice of practitioners in both the community and schools, in facilitating a more comprehensive and whole-person understanding of individuals in relationship with their bodies. Through this research, practitioners may better understand how individuals experience their bodies in ways other than the physical, how bodily experiences may affect behaviour, thinking, choices, and external relationships, and how the cultivation of connection with the body may impact individuals on multiple levels: physically, emotionally, sexually, socially, and spiritually.

Such an encompassing exploration may foster an understanding of body dis/connection in capacities beyond what we may normally perceive as body-related issues. The findings of this inquiry may thus be engaged with clients across a vastness of experiences. For example, with clients presenting with depression and/or anxiety, an exploration of the story of their journeying body may be beneficial to an understanding of the etiology of their depressive and/or anxious symptoms. Individuals experiencing post-partum depression, as another example, may find it meaningful to share the story of their birthing experience, to give voice to any potential trauma or disempowerment that they may have experienced during this time. During an illness, individuals may derive meaning from the contemplation of their body's journey, to facilitate an awareness of themselves outside of their current condition; such may provide healing and hope.

Arising from this research is clearly the power of the narrative, and the benefit that the sharing of stories may have for individuals in the owning, accepting, and understanding of their

lived experiences (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007). This research may thus be relevant to narrative therapy in creating narratives of the body that move from being problem-saturated to more alternative and preferred narratives, by deconstructing previously-held perspectives and re-storying personal experiences (Grant, Leigh-Phippard & Short, 2015). The use of narratives within body-focused research may also inform the practice of practitioners in bringing shape and awareness to dis/embodied experiences, and in opening space for what may have been previously kept locked or voiceless within the body.

This research may also be particularly aligned with the field of body psychotherapy (Aposhyan, 2004; Bois, 2009; Caldwell, 1997; Conger, 1994; Totton, 2003), which facilitates a realigning of the full self through a deeper alignment with and awareness of the body, and which may be engaged in collaboration with narrative therapy to bring to words the sensations, voices, and experiences of the body. In my own personal practice, I intend to engage the findings of this study through the development of body connection groups, focused on adolescent and adult women, in which I will engage both somatic and narrative practices. This inquiry will also inform further research that I intend to conduct with other populations, as discussed previously. The opportunities afforded by this inquiry are exciting and empowering.

### Closing

However, this research journey is, for the time being, complete. The hermeneutic circle is slowly winding to a close, returning to the place where it began: the intersection of curiosity and implicit knowing. It also brings collective understandings back to an inner space of contemplation. Although in this inquiry the body has been explored in its beauty, meaning, wisdom, and power, its mystery remains, giving fuel to enriched reflection, as is foundational to hermeneutic scholarship. Reflection continues upon who we are as embodied beings, living



within our own physical self, and yet intricately connected with that which exists beyond the boundary of our skin. Central to my thinking at this time is the notion that this research has never been purely about the physical, just as many of the experiences as shared in the narratives have not, actually, been rooted in the body, but in our dis/embodyed reactions to and conceptions of the world around and within us. So, too, has this research always been connected to the outside, looking outward to the collectivity, rooted in a desire to understand the experience of being embodied – and being one body of many – within the world.

To bring us once again outwards, beyond the parameters of this research, into the experiences of dis/connection that are awaiting within our own bodies, I choose the following words of Phillips (2011):

Our bodies are not something we must triumph over. They are the medium of our transformation, the cauldron in which the elements of heaven and earth are steeped until they transmute one day into the Being of which we are now the embryo. The journey we are on is the journey to fulfill this destiny, and we accomplish it through remembering our true nature, not through learning. We accomplish it by being true to our instincts, by listening to the wisdom of our bodies, and by abandoning all notions of separate and other. This is the great challenge upon us, and it is revolutionary work . . . we must act on the basis of what we feel and know from our own experience (p.51).

Such is the mystery, beauty, and meaning of the body experience, as powerfully relayed by the narratives of the journeying body.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experiences of movement from disconnection to connection with your body?

### Sub-questions

- i) Where would you like to begin in the sharing of your story? Why do you choose to start here?
- ii) Describe the key points on your journey from disconnection to connection with your body. Highlight key facets and aspects. Tell a story about each.

2. What is/was this experience like for you? Highlight key aspects.

### Sub-questions

- i) How does/did this transition feel for you, emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, and/or sexually?
- ii) How do/did you know that you are/were experiencing the process of connection with your body?

3. How do you interpret the transition from disconnection to connection with your body? Highlight key aspects.

### Sub-questions

- i) What does it mean for you to have experienced such a transition from disconnection to connection with your body?
- ii) What sorts of words or images would you choose to represent such a transition?

4. Now that we've discussed this transition, how would you represent this journey artistically, visually, creatively? For example, would you choose to paint a picture of the transition of your journeying body? Would you like to write a poem about it? Etc.

5. Do you believe that we have an inherent connection with our body or an inherent disconnection? Please elaborate.

## Appendix B: Information Letter

Title: The journeying body: Narratives of women who have experienced the transition from disconnection to connection with their body

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Deidre Keating and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Education (Counselling Psychology) program at Memorial University. I will soon be conducting research in order to collect data for my Master's thesis, and I would like to invite you to participate in my research study. My research focuses on women's journeys from disconnection to connection with their bodies. I am interested in exploring how women experience such a transition, as well as how they interpret this process.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be invited to engage in an individual interview and a follow-up interview with me, both of which will be audio taped and transcribed. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place. In addition to the interviews, you will be invited to read the transcripts of the interviews and make any necessary revisions, additions, or omissions to the data. There will be an open dialogue between us, in order to ensure that the data is accurate and reliable. Your total time commitment for this study will be between two and four hours.

This research study will explore stories of your experiences with your body, and your interpretations of the movement that your body has made from disconnection to connection. Before taking part in this study, it is important that you understand the benefits and risks of participation. Firstly, you may benefit by sharing your story with me, a captive audience. I am deeply interested in hearing about your experiences and the meanings that you make from them. You may also benefit from giving voice to your experiences, by sharing them aloud, and by verbally honouring the movement that your body has made towards re-connection. You may arrive at new insight and understanding through such storytelling. In addition to the benefits that you may feel individually, the community as a whole may benefit as well. The research that I am conducting will add a new perspective to the research that currently exists surrounding women's relationship with their bodies. It is my hope that this current study will enable us, the general public, individuals to view our experiences with our bodies in a different light, and to allow us to connect with our bodies once again.

In terms of the risks that you may encounter in this study, the only foreseeable risk is that of emotional upset. You will be invited to share personal details with me during the interviews, but only the information that you are comfortable sharing. You direct the course of the interview, and, as such, you are free to share as much or as little personal information as you would like. I will not ask or expect you to disclose any information that you are not comfortable sharing. If at any time of this study you feel any strong emotions arise, or if you no longer feel comfortable sharing, you have the option to take a break from the interviews, change the direction of the dialogue, or withdraw from the study altogether. As a student in the Counselling Psychology program, I have experience working with diverse individuals and topics, and I am able to work with you to manage your emotions, should they happen to arise. I am also knowledgeable about

the services and programs that exist in our community, should you wish to connect with any external help or support. Please note that you are the one in control in this study, and you have the choice with how you would like to proceed in the telling of your stories.

Please note that confidentiality is a priority of this study. I will not discuss your participation with anyone except my supervisor, and the data that you provide during your interviews will be reported anonymously. The data of this study will be kept in a safe, locked drawer at my house and will only be reviewed by me and my supervisor. There will be no identifying information on the data, such as names, and the data will be kept in a separate place than the consent form, so that no association can be made between participant and information. Once the study is complete, the data will be kept in a locked file at Memorial University for five years; it will then be destroyed. Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research requires retention of data for a minimum of five years.

As with any study, it is difficult to ensure complete anonymity. However, if you wish to have further anonymity, you have the option to change, add, or omit details in your own transcripts. I will be using the results of this study to write my Master's thesis and to submit some peer-reviewed articles to scholarly journals; however, I will not include any identifying information in my thesis or in any future publications. A copy of my thesis will be made available to you once completed, upon request.

Please remember that your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw, you will have the option of what will happen with your data. You can either take the data with you, in which case the transcript and audio tape will be provided to you, or you can leave the data in the study. The choice will be yours and I will respect your choice completely. If you withdraw from the study at any time, this will have no negative consequences for you. Your relationship with me or Memorial University will not be affected in any way.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research, and has found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have any ethical concerns regarding this study, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have about this study, and I invite you to get in touch with me if you have any queries or if you would like to volunteer for this study.

On behalf of myself and every woman who may benefit from this research, I thank you for your consideration.

With gratitude,  
Deidre Keating, B.A., B.Ed., M.Ed. (Counselling Psychology) candidate  
Memorial University

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent**

Title: The journeying body: Narratives of women who have experienced the transition from disconnection to connection with their body

Researcher: Deidre Keating, candidate for Masters of Education (Counselling Psychology)

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “The journeying body: Narratives of women who have experienced the transition from disconnection to connection with their body.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It provides you with a detailed idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. Take time to read this form of informed consent carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Deidre Keating, if you have any questions about the study or if you require further information before you give your informed consent.

### **Introduction**

My name is Deidre Keating and I am a student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. I am currently completing my Masters in Education (Counselling Psychology). As part of my Master’s thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Morgan Gardner (Faculty of Education at Memorial University).

### **Purpose of study:**

The purpose of my proposed study is to explore the experiences of women who have transitioned from a state of disconnection with their body to a state of connection. My study intends to examine how connection with the body occurs and how women interpret the process of this transition.

### **What you will do in this study:**

This study involves hearing the narratives of 6 women who have experienced the movement from disconnection to connection with their body. Selected participants will take place in an individual interview and a follow-up interview at a mutually agreed upon location that is quiet and private. The total time commitment for participants will be between 2-4 hours. Please note that the interviews will be audio-recorded.

Once I have transcribed the individual interviews, all participants will receive a copy of their own transcript and will be asked to make any revisions, including adding new information, omitting some details, or making any necessary corrections. The participants will then engage in a follow-up interview, at which time they will discuss any changes that they have made to their transcripts, as well as offer any new ideas, details, or insights. There will be an open dialogue

between the researcher and participants, so that the data from both interviews remains valid and reliable.

### **Withdrawal from the study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants are welcomed to share only what they feel comfortable sharing. If at any time a participant feels uncomfortable, uncertain, nervous, embarrassed, upset, or afraid, she has the right to stop the interview, take a break, change the direction of the dialogue, or withdraw completely from the study.

Participants are able to withdraw completely from the study at any time. If they do withdraw, there will be no penalty whatsoever; their withdrawal will not have any effect on their relationship with either the researcher or Memorial University. The researcher will totally respect their decision. If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study, she has the choice as to what will happen with her data. She can either take the data with her, at which time the transcript and audio tape will be provided to her and the files will be deleted from the researcher's computer, or leave her data in the research.

### **Possible benefits:**

Participants of this study can directly benefit from telling their stories to an individual who is deeply interested in hearing about the transition that their body has experienced from disconnection to connection. This could potentially be an empowering experience for the participants, to share their story of connection with an individual who feels inspired and intrigued by their process, and to give voice to the experiences that they have had with their body.

### **Possible risks:**

The only foreseeable risk in taking part in a study such as this is the risk of emotional upset. Because of the personal nature of this topic, some participants may feel vulnerable while telling their story.

I am student in my final two semesters of the Masters of Education (Counselling Psychology) program and I have already completed a successful four-month internship at a local counseling organization. Thus I have experience dealing with emotions and matters of a sensitive nature. If strong emotions do arise during the interview or group session, I am able to engage my counselling skills in order to bring the participant(s) back to the present moment. In the case of strong emotions, the participant(s) may take a break from the interview, change the direction of the interview, or withdraw from the study. If they require external assistance, such as from a counselor, a psychologist, or a social worker, I will speak to them about the services and programs that are offered in and around St. John's.

### **Confidentiality and Storage of Data:**

Confidentiality is a very important aspect of this study. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure that the identities of the participants will be kept confidential throughout the course of the study. I will not disclose the identity of any of the participants. The individual interviews will take place in private locations, wherein privacy will be respected. My university supervisor and I will be the only people with access to the data of this study. All audio tapes and transcripts will be safely stored in a locked drawer at my house. The transcripts and audiotapes will be kept separate from the consent forms so that no association between interviews and participants can be made. The participants will be asked to select a pseudonym to represent them in the written research and no authentic names will ever be recorded, unless explicitly requested by the participant(s). The data will remain on my computer and I will be the only person with access to this computer. Once the research study has terminated, the data will be locked in a file cabinet at Memorial University, and will be shredded (transcripts and consent form) and destroyed (audio tapes) after five years. Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research requires retention of data for a minimum of five years.

### **Anonymity:**

It is difficult to ensure complete anonymity in this study. However, participants have the option of changing certain details in their stories in order to protect their anonymity. They can alter some personal details, or remove certain data, in order to ensure anonymity. Participants will not be identified by name in the thesis or any subsequent publications made by the researcher, unless explicitly requested by the participant(s).

### **Reporting of Results:**

The data collected during this study will form the framework of my Master's thesis. I also intend to publish some peer-reviewed articles, based on my findings, in scholarly journals.

### **Sharing of Results with Participants:**

I will be connected directly to each of the participants throughout every step of this study. Once the study has been completed, I will make available a copy of my thesis to all participants, if requested.

### **Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact me at the email address and/or telephone number that will be provided to you. The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR.

**Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that, if you choose to withdraw from the study, you have the choice to take your data with you, or to leave your data in the study.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your signature:**

- I have read and understood what this study is about and I appreciate the risks and benefits of participation. I have had adequate time to think about this and have had the opportunity to ask questions. My questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project, understanding the risks and contributions of my participation. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any time.
- I agree to be audio-recorded during the interviews.
- I agree to the use of quotations in the researcher's thesis and any resulting publications of this study, without using any identifying names.
- I agree to help the researcher verify that my data is valid and reliable by reading the transcripts and making any necessary adjustments (additions, omissions, or corrections).

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## **Appendix D: The story of my journeying body**

### Grounding

My own journey towards connection started without me being aware of it, just as my experiences of disconnection coloured my life for so long, without me having the language or the awareness to identify it as such. For several years, I lived within a space of fogginess, as if suspended outside of my body, looking inwards. When I started to feel centered again, balanced and whole, that is when I began viewing the world from the inside out, through my own eyes, rather than that of an observer. My body's journey is very fresh in my mind, and I could discuss its pieces with detail. In this narrative, I will illustrate the key experiences along its vibrant path.

### Experiencing

My childhood unfolded in nature, as I grew up in the woods behind my house. I was always surrounded by a gaggle of girls around my own age. Together, we lived and loved, tramping through the woods, and using our vivid imaginations as our primary sources of entertainment. I remember squeezing ourselves through the jagged hole in a barbed wire fence that would lead us to our secret world. Off we would go, soaking up the energy of the trees, finding forest treasures, and having elaborate funeral processions for any dead animals that would cross our path. One time we came across a dead seagull, which intrigued us to no end. Another time, we stumbled across a pile of yellowing Playboy magazines, and spent the afternoon staring in wonder at the big breasts and vaginas unapologetically displayed. In all of our adventures, we approached the world with a beautiful sense of curiosity. As such, our days passed, joyfully and contentedly. Throughout our experiences, my body never came into question, other than being the vehicle through which I sparkled with activity, health, creativity, playfulness, and positive energy.

## Internalizing

My first conscious memory of examining my body happened at the age of 12, when an elder commented that I looked quite “fat”. Having grown up in a much different era than me, and thus wearing a different cultural lens, this comment was likely offered in a spirit of love. To this person, having lived through some historically impoverished periods, “fat” meant healthy, glowing, well taken care of, and rich: everything that I actually was. But to me, and my developing psyche, “fat” had more severe implications. At the tender age of twelve, I somehow had learned that fat was wrong, and that I should not want to be labelled as such. It is interesting to note that my understanding of being labelled in this way had little to do with the actual physical manifestation of being fat (that is, having fat on my body), but rather with how others would view me if they knew that I was, indeed, fat. It was all about the external perspective rather than the internal experience. This was perhaps the beginning of the split between me as an internal experience, and me as an external observer.

Looking at a school picture from my thirteenth year, I see a smiling girl with a big, wide face, pink-framed glasses nestled atop rosy red cheeks, and a beautiful, developing young adult body, curvy and growing. But my eyes speak of my insecurity, awkwardness, and uncertainty. This picture is precious, so full of beauty and innocence, and I now have it displayed proudly on my bookshelf. However, I recall viewing it through my pre-teen eyes and thinking, fat. Big. Gross. It was during this period of shifting into adolescence that I moved from my understanding of fat as being undesirable to an emerging belief of fat as the embodiment of disgust.

In journeying into my teenage years, I was starting to move away from the social self that I knew, in becoming more introverted and spending more time in my own little world. Although I still had plenty of friends and loved spending time with them, I also enjoyed spending

increasing amounts of time by myself: writing, thinking, and reading. I was happy in my quiet world, and my inner life was becoming even more vivid as I began to immerse myself within my love for creative writing.

### Sparkling

The discomfort that I felt during junior high quickly faded away once I entered high school, and decided to fully embody the vivacious, creative person that I knew myself to be. My days passed in a blur of colour and activity. I embraced my inner hippy, and wore colourful concoctions of vintage clothing, some inherited by my paternal grandmother, others procured during hours-long sprees at Value Village. A living, breathing fashion show from the 60s and 70s, I was in my glee with my funky braids and brilliant bellbottoms. I was supremely content, cushioned from the world by the love of a boy, my first boyfriend, who deeply loved me as I was. He was a special boy, also seemingly from a different time and place, and we were beautifully matched in our uniqueness.

My body was never a question with him, nor was it a challenge with me. This was the first time that I experienced the body of another person, and experienced my own body in relation to his. Although our relationship was never sexual as such, it was a very touch-filled experience, wherein both of us wanted to be near each other, holding hands, making out, hugging, and lying next to each other. We would spend hours exploring ourselves and being alone in our shared world. I felt parts of me awakening in magical ways. My body was so loved by him, as was each part of my whole self. I was loved, accepted, and seen for who I truly was. Everything that I was seemed to be mirrored within him as well.

Our life together was literally perfect, until, quite suddenly, it was not. Although I can't explain what motivated me to do it, I broke up with the love of my life quite erratically and in

a very disrespectful manner. It was extremely sudden, and caught us both off guard. And from that point onwards, we existed in two totally separate worlds. We did not look at each other or speak to each other for a long time. As we had broken up in words only, and because our bodies had been so attached, my own body mourned his absence. I still felt connected to him, physically, even though I was cognitively aware that we were no longer together and I struggled internally to find out why. What had caused me to sever the connection of love that had once fed me? Years after, my body still continued to react when I would see him or think of him, as evidence of the very intangible way in which we had separated and the energetic connection that had withered, but had not fully been lost.

### Isolating

Enter my university years, the chaos of which drove me in the direction of my first flirtation with extreme bodily disconnection. I was suddenly tossed into a world that was lonely: without contact, without structure, and without every comfort that I had known in high school. The entire first year of university, I recall feeling out of place, viscerally and energetically. I felt as though the bodily version of myself was no longer accepted, in all of my vibrant colour. It was not cool to be a hippy on campus. I was overcome with a sense of being stifled, having to change who I was to be accepted, no longer being able to be the cute, spunky, colourful Deidre that I had so loved over the years.

During this year, relationships and friendships shifted; my friends became involved with new partners, and I was often alone, on the outskirts of their dating adventures. I could have dated, but truthfully my heart was still broken and sad. I did not want to be with anybody but my first love, whom I deeply missed. I started to equate my loneliness with my physicality, meaning, I was lonely because I was fat and weird and nobody wanted to be with me. This was the time

when my body suddenly became the object of my disdain. I have vivid recollections of wanting to take a knife and slice off my stomach, once thought to be cute and a bit pudgy, now imagined to be the barrier between me and finding love and acceptance in this strange new world to which I felt I did not belong. Visions haunted my mind of the idea of walking and walking and walking, until my stomach fat melted away. This was a premonition of what was to come. It was as though I was thinking the next few years into motion.

### Fading

Eventually, the life force drained out of me. I decided to stop wearing my colourful wardrobe, and turned into a uninspired version of my former self. Without any real attachments to friends or boyfriends, I felt invisible anyway, so why not match my exterior to what I was feeling inside? I dyed my hair black, and wore a daily uniform consisting of a pale grey sweater, and black leggings. This was the beginning of my first deep episode of depression, which catapulted me further away from the me that I had once known and loved. While I had experienced sadness at the tail end of high school, that had been a sadness of grief, as I mourned the loss of a deeply meaningful relationship. This now was an existential sadness, in which I felt disconnected from life in general. I felt as if there was nobody in my life who cared for me, or even saw me. My energetic force, once so vibrant and lovely, dimmed. It, quite literally, depressed. Depression is a very embodied experience: I felt it in every cell of my body. I felt myself physically distancing from myself, splitting, wanting so badly to be out of my body, to change who I was, in order to feel wanted, accepted, or even noticed. I existed in isolation, lost and set adrift.

### Retreating

This year faded into the next, and my thoughts escalated in such a fashion that I no longer wanted to be around people, at all. I wanted to be with myself, and myself only. I resented being in university, resented studying things that I had no interest in, resented being alone while everyone else was coupled up, and resented having hurt the only love that I had ever known. In short, I resented everything about my life. It was a difficult period for those around me, as I isolated myself further from my friends, and refused to discuss what was going on with anyone. I retreated inside my bubble, and I loved being there, in my isolation, away from the world that was maddening me and disappointing me at every turn.

It was then that I became entangled in an experience of extreme disconnection. In order to transcend my loneliness, I decided to make radical changes in my way of existing. Quite suddenly I stopped eating and started exercising maniacally several hours per day. This made me content once again, although I am now able to see that it was more of a deliriousness than anything. I was fed on adrenaline, which is an amazing fuel; but adrenaline alone is a dangerous diet. I was shrouded in invincibility, and felt that nobody could touch me, stop me, or understand me. In my own world, I did not have any emotional needs that were not being met, nor did I have any emotional entanglements. Hurt did not exist, nor loneliness. It was me, and me alone, and that was enough.

### Revolting

My body, as do the bodies of anorectics, began a revolt, or what I thought was a revolt at the time. I now see my body's reaction as a loving, nurturing response, one that tried to keep me safe and stable. I eventually began growing white fur on my face, which is the body's natural response to lack of nutrients, and a protective measure to maintain warmth while rapidly losing

fat reserves. My crowning achievement was losing my period; I will never forget the day that I realized that my period had not come, and probably would not come again. I was ecstatic, knowing that my body was no longer able to have a period because of my lack of fat. I was literally overjoyed, thinking to myself, “Haha, I win!” Amenorrhea was evidence that I was more powerful than my body, that I was able to control my body’s functions, and, that, therefore, I was winning. I remember hearing the song “Survivor” on the radio at the gym during that time and, thinking to myself with a self-satisfied smirk, “I AM a survivor. I’m not going to give up. I will be successful, whether you like it or not.” The “you” in question at the time was anybody and anything outside of my bubble: thus, in fact, the entire world.

### Erasing

Slowly, I was erasing myself. This was not only extreme disconnection, this was dangerous. I was in a manic state, totally wrapped up in my own self, completely ego-centric, not seeing how my behaviour and the changes in my body and mood were affecting those around me. I remember my mother facing me one day, at the beginning of my descent, as I was losing massive amounts of weight in a matter of weeks, and asking if I was using diet pills. I answered flippantly, “No, I don’t have to”, assured that my willpower was invincible. Upon meeting friends for “dinner”, which I did not eat, they inquired how I had lost so much weight so quickly. I replied, “I don’t eat anymore”, truly believing that this was the greatest plan in the world. I was enormously proud of myself and revelled in their disbelieving eyes.

Another time, two of my friends tried to have an intervention with me, cornering me one evening after class. I, en route to yet another punishing workout at the gym, asked them in very clear terms to “Fuck off and leave me alone”, which, eventually, they did. Everybody started to leave me alone, as I pushed them further away and retreated more into my own world. My days

were spent watching my stomach shrink, and pushing myself relentlessly, running, stepping, crunching, erasing my body -- because that's what I was trying to do. It wasn't about getting healthy or fit or being successful, as I tried to convince myself. It was not about the weight. It was about being miserably stifled in a world that I no longer wanted to be in or felt part of, and wanting to transcend my reality, through erasing myself, making myself invisible, and then slowly disappearing.

### Fleeing

Somewhere within my instability at this time, I had the brilliant idea to actually disappear: to move away and begin life anew in a new place. I decided to go to Quebec City for a few semesters, to fulfill the language requirements of my French degree. And thus I moved, taking with me deteriorating eating behaviours and rapidly-worsening body disdain. The summer that I moved, I survived on apples, bagels, and lettuce, and, because I was living by myself, there was nobody to watch over my intake or to ask me any incriminating questions. Thus, my disordered eating was given the space to flourish.

I had met a group of friends at my new university very quickly, and together we partied non-stop. This was the university experience that I had been craving. In their eyes, I was fresh, mysterious, and sexy. And their only knowledge of me was as I appeared to be: skinny and fun. A new persona was thus being created. Finally, I was once again being seen, and, not only seen, but accepted and desired. That summer, I flirted, dated, danced, and studied, all the while continuing my affair with starvation. Each morning, I would order a muffin and a milk at the cafeteria, and that would be the extent of my intake for the day. I would drink my calories in liquor, and refuse to eat anything other than the few items on my "safe" list. This list was highly exclusive. I have flashbacks of myself picking out cubes of cheese from my salads, afraid of its



damaging potential on my perfect body. Apples were safe, as were bagels. Rum was safe, cheese was not, my distorted brain decided. Such were my rules.

With my hectic schedule of studying and partying, I was on a very dangerous path with minimal nutritional intake and maximum energetic outtake. What I was consuming was in no way replenishing the energy that I was spending being the sexy, feisty, mysterious thing that I was. I finally caught up with myself one afternoon, as I drank so much rum and had eaten so very little that I vomited all over my dorm room, and had to be put to bed while the others got ready to go out. My stomach was literally on the floor, with no bits of food to be seen. A few years later, upon meeting up with a friend from my Quebec days at a bar in Toronto, I would admit that I had been in the throes of an eating disorder at this time, and he would agree, saying that they had all been worried about me.

At the end of my crazy summer, I came home for a visit, and I must have looked quite gaunt, as my father asked if I had eaten anything while I had been gone. My mother, as well, showed concern for me, begging me to eat some mayonnaise, something, anything, to put fat on my body again. One morning, as I was eating two slices of whole wheat toast, plain, my father yelled at me to put something on the toast. This was already quite a feat for me, eating two slices, and I told him that I couldn't possibly put anything on them. I was so afraid of butter, fearful that it would make me bloat upon impact into a ball of fat, and that I would thereafter be disgusting again. This was how my mind was operating, and I saw nothing wrong with the thought process. I was literally terrified of fat, and resented anyone who offered guidance, paranoid that they wanted to change me, to make me revert back to the disgusting mess that I had imagined myself to be in years past. Whenever anybody voiced their concerns about me, I would think, "You don't know me. You don't understand me. I'm going back inside now, to my own

world, where I make the rules.” It was comforting and peaceful there.

Upon returning to Quebec City for the fall semester, my disordered eating took off in a very negative direction. The friends with whom I had had such a wonderfully chaotic summer had since returned to their respective cities, having only been in Quebec for the summer term, and I found myself quite alone, not by choice. I missed them and our magical times deeply. Without them, I had no idea as to who I was. Gone was the mysterious, flirty creature who had thrived in their midst. Now I was left to wander and discover myself anew. I was surviving solely on raisins and prunes, bought in huge containers and inhaled within a few days. The only nourishment that I permitted myself were these two dried fruits, chosen not for their laxative effects, but for the fact that they contained zero fat. Fat was forever the enemy, and the avoidance of fat soon became my number one pastime, controlling my thoughts and actions.

The danger of consuming large quantities of laxatives, and the potential lasting damage that they could inflict on my inner systems, never once crossed my mind. As long as they had no fat, I was content. I recall being quite pleased with my scant purchases, sauntering through the supermarket clutching two gigantic containers, reveling in the knowledge that I was the only one in the store who would be skinny and healthy. Everyone else, all the regular people eating regular food, were obviously not succeeding like I was. I still thought that I was a success at the game, whatever the game was. I did not see how unhealthy I had become. I could barely see anything, through my haze of fog and dissociation.

While fat was my enemy, the gym was my best friend; it was always there for me. I would go there each day for hours, by myself. I had my own routine down pat: cardio for a few hours, then crunches, leg lifts, push-ups for another few. Weights, no. Anything that involved burning calories without bulking up, yes. Erasing, erasing, erasing; that’s what I was attempting

to do. There was no way that my body was benefiting from this activity, as it didn't have the nutrients it needed in order to walk a set of stairs to class, let alone burn thousands of calories in one shot. But, yet, this is what I did, each and every day. This was my life source. My brain was completely muddled, yet the persistently foggy feeling was a sign of my success. Who cared if I could not concentrate, as long as I was skinny and in control and living life on my own terms? It was a very twisted way of thinking, but it made sense to my malnourished brain.

After many months of starvation, my body revolted once again. Really, what else could it do other than just give up? I was blatantly depriving it of the essentials that it needed, and putting such a strain on my internal systems that I am surprised that my body lasted in such good health as it did for so long. The turning point came one day as I was gripped by an overwhelming stomach cramp that tore my body in two. I buckled over in class, in so much agony that I could barely breathe. My stomach was so constipated from its diet of laxatives, and I literally thought that I was dying. I remember thinking, how will I make it from the bathroom in the language building, to my dorm, just a few blocks away? I couldn't walk, as my body could hardly stand straight.

A friend of mine brought me to my room – me doubled over, her hobbling alongside – making sure that I was safe in bed, and advising me to have something healthy to eat when I woke up. She didn't know the extent – or the minimal amount, depending on how you viewed it – of what I had been consuming at the time, but my shrinking frame probably told her the answer. In my haze, I mentally pushed her away from me, and severed our friendship ties. Her closeness and concern scared me. I told myself that I had to get away from her: she was just like the others, trying to change me, and invading my beautifully crafted inner world. This was yet another very demented thought and behaviour that my hungry brain processed as being rational.

## Indulging

After an extended period of extreme deprivation, my body thereafter started to give me indications that it had had enough. It wanted to eat. It wanted to indulge in rich, substantial food. It wanted everything that I had been depriving it, and then some, now. So, I listened to my body's urgings, and I began to eat once again. However, after cultivating such erratic patterns, my eating behaviour was totally off track; I had forgotten how to eat properly. Thus, once I started, I could not stop. It was as though I was cramming years of nutrition into each and every bite.

Amongst this frenetic feasting, my fear of gaining weight grabbed me relentlessly by the throat. I was desperate to not become fat. And so, I took the road that many anorectics do, when they find themselves barreling in the opposite direction: I started to purge. It was not about throwing up meals as such, because I wasn't eating anything of nutritional sustenance. I was throwing up copious amounts of sugary, fat-laden snacks that my body seemingly demanded to be fed. It became a nightly adventure for me. I would creep to the vending machine in the basement of my dormitory a few times each evening, addicted to the pastries displayed therein, of which I would buy several at one time. I would then rush upstairs, bursting for my fix, and inhale them all in one breath. Then came the standing-over-the-sink part, watching the broken bits of pastry fall down the drain. It wasn't even digested; it would come out in slippery chunks. I remember the pain in my stomach as this happened, and a disjointed feeling that told me that this was not right.

I had a moment of rational thought one evening as I realized, with clarity, while watching the sad chunks make their way down the pipe, that this was not for me. Throwing up food was not my style. Starvation, yes. Bingeing and purging, absolutely not. It hurt my stomach, and I

couldn't stand the pain. It felt like my body was talking back to me, and I was actually listening. So, after a while of trying out this disordered behaviour, I decided to simply eliminate one part of my eating routine. I would allow myself to eat, and eat, and eat – at this time I felt powerless beneath the hungry demands of my body – without purging, thus bringing another source of disconnect into my life.

### Falling

As I began to satisfy my body's cravings, my body naturally started to gain weight – incredible amounts. I went from famine to feast in a short period of time, and my body spun wildly in this new direction. Lingering ideas of what it meant to be fat started waking up in my fuzzy brain: I was disgusting, depressed, and mad at the world once again. I felt myself becoming detached from the sense of self, however warped, that I had cultivated over the last few years.

As is my normal thought pattern during times of stress, I desperately needed to flee. And such, I escaped once again, dropping out of my program, quitting my job, and moving back home, where I went through an intense bout of depression which lasted an entire winter. I was a miserable person to be around, as I didn't even want to be around myself. While rapidly gaining weight, my misery and self-pity grew, and I fell further down the rabbit hole of disconnection. I convinced myself that my body was taking over me, by steadily increasing in mass, and I couldn't do anything to stop its expansion. I could no longer control it or morph it into what I wanted it to be; I was helpless, and too mentally weak to fight it. My body was no longer part of me; it was totally a foreign entity that I was forced to live within. It took up the position that the world had previously occupied: that of the enemy, that which I wanted desperately to get away from.

## Rebelling

With the arrival of the summer, my depression lifted somewhat, and my disconnection changed forms. In an effort to bring myself back to life, I started working at a coffee shop, where a new group of friends quickly entered my life. An exciting and dangerous form of disconnection thereafter arose, in the form of partying and promiscuity. During this period, I would attend classes, in an extremely foggy state. I had returned to eating minimally and drinking copiously, and was partying literally four nights out of seven, while trying to keep the academic part of myself still somewhat intact. The new version of me that had spontaneously been created loved this carefree, rebellious, free-loving lifestyle, so different from the isolation and depression that it had not long since departed. My mind was like a kid in a candy store, while my body – tired and traumatized from years of self-abuse – was dragged along for the ride. While I had some amazingly fun experiences during this time, and have some wonderful memories of being young and carefree, I cringe upon thinking of the damage that I inflicted upon my poor, bewildered body.

While I felt strongly connected to my peer group, and really enjoyed the rapid pace of our lives together, I was totally detached from my body. With the amount of neglect that I was heaping upon it, it was like my body didn't even exist. I remember sitting in a seminar class one day, attempting to be articulate and awake, and looking down at myself through hazy eyes, thinking that my lower body felt as distant as if it belonged to someone else. Due to my infrequent eating regime, I had once again whittled myself down to a very small size, and my clothes were falling off my frame. With maniacal energy coursing through me, I would zip up the stairs to the fourth floor where my classes were, jeans practically falling to my ankles, and sit like a lump in the class, trying to form coherent thoughts in my chosen subject, French. I could

barely articulate myself in English properly at the time, and I had very few brain cells willing to dedicate themselves to the pursuit of another language.

I was totally and completely disoriented, only truly coming alive after hours. The only times that I was aware of my body were while dancing wildly at a club, or during casual sexual encounters. Such encounters, although essentially void of meaning, helped me become aware of myself in the moment. They were all about interaction and touch, which was something that I was lacking. I craved presence and connection, which, by myself, I couldn't feel. My feelings had long since been numbed. I had to have another body pressed against mine in order to keep me from flying away. My search for a body to lay against was a search for *any* body, essentially. I was not looking for love, as I had already tasted the real thing and had thrown it away, and had convinced myself that I wasn't likely to find it again.

### Shaming

During this period, I was detached from my body for an avalanche of reasons. I was not eating. I was drinking all of my calories. I was sleeping with people who did not respect or honour me or my body. These casual interactions were exciting, but ultimately left me feeling empty and alone. I was struggling to stay awake and coherent as an upper level undergraduate student, juggling my eating disorder and promiscuity with a heavy course load plus a few part-time jobs. Lastly, and perhaps most devastatingly of all, I had a confusing and conflicting sexual interaction -- rape? assault? mistake? -- at a supposed friend's house. There. That was the final piece that I needed in order to be catapulted into the most lasting form of disconnection that I have ever experienced.

Like many people who have experienced the same, I carry with me the twisted understanding that, because I had been drinking that night, the experience was my fault; this has

led me to keep the memory silent in words, only spoken through my body. My inability to be around certain types of men is indicative of a body still under threat from another imminent invasion.

### Sacrificing

Feeling lonely and ashamed after the violation, I blindly stumbled into a relationship with another man a few months later. A damaged soul, he reflected back to me the lowness that I felt about myself. He was a recovering addict, who not long after started to use again, and had recently moved back home to recover from a very drug-addled relationship that he had had with a heroin addict -- the perfect match for a vulnerable individual such as myself. Knowing very little about his past, I dove headfirst into what was ultimately a disastrous relationship. I only found out later that this man had serious mental issues, stemming from traumatic childhood experiences. I was not in any way equipped to help such a troubled soul, and, in my fragile state, should have stayed far away.

For the year that we were together, I was not in a healthy place. My body was still in shock from years of eating-disordered trauma, and my recent dissociative experience. I had, once again, stopped eating. Or, should I say, I had not yet started eating again. There grew circles under my eyes the size of saucers. I was torn in all directions. Everybody in my life could see that this man was trouble, but I worked hard to prove them wrong.

Having become very clingy in my craving for connection, I was determined to do whatever was necessary to be with him. I found the balance of my life spheres quite difficult, however, in struggling to adequately manage all of my roles. My life was dichotomous: student and waitress by day, partier and devoted girlfriend by night. I was constantly surrounded by drug users. I was the neophyte, and, thankfully, was not overly convinced by their offers. I was



more so intrigued by their behaviours. This was a strange time in which I felt connected to a very eclectic group of people. We were cohesive in our desire to create an alternate reality for ourselves. It felt like a small, deranged little family. With them, I experienced the highs of drugs, and the lows. I began to have terrifying hallucinations at school and at home, and it was difficult to keep my scattered mind in one piece.

Not eating, popping pills, and giving my all to a tormented man who used me: these are the ingredients for drastic separation between the body and mind of an average person, one who hadn't already experienced terrible disconnection. For me, as vulnerable, fragile, and traumatized as I was, it was detachment on a level that was so severe that I am surprised that I have been able to survive with body, mind, and spirit intact. Honestly, I could have *not* survived on many occasions, as I engaged in some risky behaviour. But I did survive, throughout it all. And this is what fuels my passion today.

### Healing

Once I extracted myself from the toxic relationship with this very broken man, and gave myself distance, my body slowly and gently started to regain its balance. Disconnection does not heal overnight. But, yet, my body was still there. No matter what I had put it through, my body was still there. My heart was still beating, though it ached with residual loss and loneliness. My brain was still working, though it was scattered and distorted. My body was strong and healthy and full of life, though it was riddled in anxiety, shock, and shame. And yet it slowly worked its way back to wholeness.

A few months following my break up with the toxic man, I took a teaching job in a small coastal community in Labrador. I did not know where I was going, what I was doing, or who I was. But I knew I had to go, to remove myself from my current story, and to find some breathing

room. The call was strong to move to a small community, far away from what I had known, near the ocean in a remote location, where I could isolate myself and bring myself back to health, mentally and physically. I didn't want to be around anyone that I knew while this process happened. I had to go, alone. No matter how precariously I was dangling at this time, I began listening to an intuitive urge within me that pleaded for silence and space to think, process, and heal. Along with the silence and distance, I needed a different pot in which to grow – a roomier pot – separate from the other flowers.

This was a challenging year for me in many ways. Teaching in such an isolated community at a young age, coupled with the unspoken fragility of my psycho/emotional wellbeing at the time, was a harrowing experience. I spent a great deal of time that year thinking and resting, in the comfort of my rented house near the ocean. My time would pass laying on the couch, staring out at the water, and being mesmerized by the seals playing in the harbour. The scenery of the desolate land was a suitable container for my healing mind. While the community had seemed small and restrictive in the fall of the year upon arrival, in the wintertime it literally opened up, with snowmobile trails expanding the land. I would go for hours, exploring the beautiful, open land, soaking in the trees and the delicious air. It was wild, simple, and fun. I laughed and shouted in delight at each hill that was conquered, and felt myself coming back to life, welcomed by nature. Just as the land opened up in winter, I, too, opened up and expanded throughout the year, as my own energy and vitality returned.

Throughout this time, I became more connected to myself, though I wouldn't say that I was truly feeling my body at all at this point. I was smoking a pack of cigarettes a day, eating fried food (which I had strangely developed a taste for and ate without any remorse), drinking copious amounts of coffee, and not getting much exercise, other than the occasional walk on the

beach or the once-weekly step class held at the community centre. It would have been the perfect place for my eating disordered behaviour to rear its head once again. But, strangely enough, it kept its distance. I felt as though I was done with fighting against myself. And, miraculously, I was starting to feel again. My numbness was still there, but my emotions were starting to trickle out, slowly. I felt sad and lost, but also hopeful and optimistic.

As the year wound to its end, my positive mood returned with a vengeance, and I left the Big Land with a bounce in my step. I returned home to St. John's, refreshed, rested, and feeling more connected to myself than I had in years. I was ecstatic to have survived the tumultuous year and that I had actually enjoyed some parts of it. When I think of it now, as challenging as it was to live in a remote community for a year as a young single girl, it was precisely what was needed. It was a detox for my body and mind, bringing the two closer together. I felt restored, and sparkled once again. Upon arriving home, I rekindled relationships with friends whom I had previously pushed away, and began a relationship with a lovely man who showed me enormous attention and love. I felt young, beautiful, and blissful.

### Grieving

And then, at the height of the summer, sadness swept in. I awoke one Sunday morning to find that my father was having a heart attack on our kitchen floor. I was not able to deal with this scene. My body froze. I had no idea what to do. I couldn't think or act or even move. I had learned CPR, but it didn't cross my mind to use it. I have no idea if I could have helped my father that day. If I had been in my body more, grounded, calm, centered, focused, could the thought have entered my mind to do CPR on my father, to get air in his system, to breathe him back to life? It is a guilt that I carry with me.

My father passed away quickly thereafter, on his way to the hospital, as I was behind the ambulance in my neighbour's car. The light on the ambulance kept flickering; the sound was muted, signaling the passenger had died. I had no idea of this at the time, because I wasn't in my body. I was somewhere in the land that I had created in my head, the land that I enter during times of stress when fleeing is not possible. When I found out later that he had passed away, I remember crawling onto my mother's lap, seeking comfort, not sure if I was giving or taking comfort, but knowing that I had to be there.

### Perfecting

The next few months passed by in a haze. I oscillated between being emotional and grieving, and yet happy that I was still alive and healthy. It was a divisive time for me: I was neither here nor there. I broke up with my summer fling because I couldn't stand his devotion to me; it was too stifling. He had loved me too much, and I couldn't give him what he needed. Once again, I took the gift of honest, simple love and threw it away, as though it was meaningless.

To alleviate the mourning of my father, I worked out non-stop. I had decided to take the year off teaching, and so now had the time to devote myself one hundred percent to my exercise regime. I was eating well; that was positive. But I was back on my chaotic fitness kick, wherein every workout had to be perfect, and every activity had to guarantee a certain number of calories burned. I wasn't working out because my body needed it; I was doing it with the desire to look a certain way, and that goal was easily achieved. I felt like dynamite: brilliant and sparkling. Nobody could touch me, because I was on fire.

It was around this time that I burned with the desire to get away once again. My instinct kicked into gear, and I knew that it was time for me to make another dramatic escape. A friend of mine had just finished a long-term relationship and was also needing an escape; so flee we did, to

Hong Kong, where I found a position as a teacher at an international school. As I left my country behind, I closed the door on five years of physical and mental torment. This was the point at which my connectivity with my body began to dramatically shift.

### Returning

Though I won't go into much detail of my time in Asia, I will summarize it in a few words: adventure, friendship, travel, sunshine, jungles, exotic men, and delicious food; just the sort of indulgence that my body and mind needed. After three years of living in another world, however, I felt the pull to return home, to the life that I knew. I desired the physical, emotional, and metaphysical space, silence, and calmness that awaited me, so different from the chaotic movement to which I had become accustomed in my time abroad.

It was in returning to my home that I returned to myself, and began to focus on who I was being in the world. My body and mind were ready to join forces once again, after years of division and chaos. And so I set about with the task of thinking about myself, my place, my purpose, and how I could best use my energy and experience in meaningful ways. Gone was the obsession about my body; in its place was a desire to know myself on a deeper level, to connect to myself on multiple levels, to engage my experiences and knowledge in a positive way, and to create the self that I wanted to be. I felt renewed and reinvigorated, and ready to begin re-learning about myself and my place in the world.

### Re-creating

My mind frame bore the first evidence of connection. In my desire to feel more connected to myself and to others, I adopted a new vision of myself as a positive, enthusiastic person, much like the identity I had cherished in the years preceding my disconnect. And so, while creating myself anew in many ways, I was also returning to the self that had been

temporarily left behind. It was as though I had pressed pause on my identity while having chased a disjointed version of self. Radiating with positive energy once again, I approached my life with a renewed sense of wonder. I felt like a survivor on multiple levels, and my strength at having overcome such challenges gave me wings. I felt blissful and free, having shaken the chains that had held me in place for so long.

With my blossoming sense of self, I set about working very diligently on becoming grounded and whole. And it was work; it took time, commitment, and focus to bring myself back into view. Balance was key for me. I had been scattered for so long, that now all I craved was simplicity and calmness in my life. I wanted to know myself deeply, and to create a new path for myself, or at least to find the one that I had previously been walking before my detour. I began reading inspiring books, journaling my hopes and desires, interacting with motivating people, developing new friendships, taking self-empowering workshops and classes, contemplating my spiritual nature, and doing everything in my power to consciously heal the divide between my body, mind, and spirit that had experienced such a chasm in the past. I was mindful of who and what entered my mind and my life, and chose the experiences and interactions that would best feed me. People magically and mysteriously entered my life at the precise times that I needed, and I welcomed this newness of energy with delight. I wanted to learn from positive people, wanted to soak up their energy, and to know the life secrets that they seemed to know. This was a time of beautiful exploration, in which I felt a simultaneous sense of returning and discovering anew.

### Sweating

To help bring myself back into alignment, I decided to re-introduce fitness to my life in a healthy manner. I did not want to work out for the sake of erasing myself or burning calories, as

had previously been my game plan, but rather to engage the new energy that was swirling in my body. My curiosity for an empowering way of moving my body brought me to join an intense cardio class called Body Combat, which quickly became my fixation. The sweat dripping off my body felt like tears of the divine, or maybe my body weeping in happiness that, finally, it was being heard and given what it desired. The muscles that began to form reminded me of the miracle of my body, which had been abused and neglected for so long, but yet had remained unwaveringly loyal and strong. I lived for the sweat, radiated with the power, and re-constructed my relationship with my body, cell by cell. This was an experience of ecstasy, and it was one that I was creating for myself: for my body, with my body, in gratitude to my body. As a by-product of moving in this glorious new way, I was eating high-energy foods, drinking water, sleeping well, and feeling the years of body alienation wash away.

### Empowering

Within months of beginning this new exercise, I was determined to instruct the class. I knew that my talent was strong in the area, and, what's more, that my body had something that it wanted to communicate: it was powerful, and wanted to teach others to embrace their own sense of power. And so I became a fully qualified fitness coach. Me: the one with the weak body. Me: the one who had fought so belligerently with my body all of those years. Me: the one whose body had been neglected, abused, and traumatized. Me: the one who had wanted to erase myself. Me: the one with the body that was always strong, capable, loving, determined, and resilient.

To me, teaching was often a mystical experience, in which I was connected to a pulsating mass of bodies, mostly female, all of us showing just how powerful and capable we could be. I was not just instructing the class, I was having life-altering, philosophical epiphanies at the same time. This was a means of connecting: with my own body, with the bodies of others, and with a

sense of purpose and meaning. It enabled me to help people re-claim their bodies. And in so doing, I was able to re-unite with my own, after so many years of estrangement.

### Discovering

In engaging the energy in my body, and feeling myself coming back to life, insights of a spiritual nature began to ease into my brain, thus inviting a new layer of connection into the emerging identity that I was so diligently and excitedly creating. I started perceiving myself as an energetic being housed inside of a physical shell, which allowed me to contemplate the journeys of my body in an expansive spiritual light. Thus began an exploration of my spirituality, and a sense of peace with the idea of God as an energy, a spirit, and a life force, and with the body as a sacred vessel, and a miraculous gift. I was amazed at this arising belief of myself as a spiritual being, housed within a living, breathing vessel. Yoga, prayer, and meditation became elements of my life at this time. I felt myself internally awakening, crawling out of a long hibernation, and viewing the world with awe-struck eyes. There were literally times that brought me to tears of gratitude and appreciation for the healthy new way in which my brain was operating, as if the perpetual fog of the past few years had lifted, leaving in its wake curiosity, awareness, and delight at being alive. When I began to think of my body through the lens of spirituality, I was able to cherish, nurture, and appreciate it for its magic and wonder, and to value it as the home of my creative, emotional, physical, and sexual energy.

### Opening

It was around this time of spiritual awakening that I opened my heart again, and fell in love with a gorgeous, kind man. Our relationship was short-lived and tumultuous, but it was equally beautiful, life-giving, passionate, and sensual. A brilliant medical student who captivated me instantly, he was the first man that I had been with in years who had actually made



me feel appreciated and loved, and whose love I actually accepted. He was a simple and intelligent man, a nature lover, who enjoyed listening to old soul music, dancing slowly, and reading Thoreau, and I fell deeply for his peaceful vibes, which were totally in tune with my own. He made me feel truly alive in my body once again. He was what my body needed, to remember its capacity to love and be loved, and he appeared in my life at the precise time, when I was present in my body enough to actually feel it. As our relationship came to its natural end, I was appreciative of its very beginning, as it had renewed my faith in the presence of love – and in my capacity to see it and value it -- and let my heart know that it was safe to open again.

All in all, during this time, my body was in a space of bliss, newly open to the joys of the human and spiritual experience. My heart was learning to be more open, and it was slowly exiting its hiding place. My spirit was soaring with new understandings and beliefs, and it was enabling me to surround myself with people who mirrored the same. And my mind was calm and focused, having healed its frenetic divide.

### Changing

Within the last few years, since beginning this research, my journeying body has continued its shift, bringing with it new understandings. I have since quit teaching at the gym, as it no longer supported the calm, gentle me that I was becoming, and my body was starting to tell me, through various aches and pains, that it was now desiring more calming activities. It wanted to be gentle and still. Dance became a part of my life, as did other creative pursuits. As I stopped working out fanatically and began to engage in other types of activities, my body began to round, naturally. I was not pushing it or sculpting it in any way, but was rather allowing it to take the form that it desired. At times I struggled with this new version of myself, and the

anorectic within me, buried in my cells, did cry out sporadically. However, what had shifted for me was the awareness of *why* this voice was crying out to me, *where* it had come from, and *how* it was up to me to change it. This was an empowering period for me on multiple levels, as I met myself in ways that I had never quite before.

I am now gentle with my body, and am welcoming this new changing form for all of its beauty and strength. I have been able to channel this energy in creative ways, writing about my experiences than re-living them, and showing others the vision of a woman who accepts and appreciates her evolving body. It has been a continuous practice of self-love and mindfulness, all in gratitude and respect to my beautiful and faithful body. After so many years of being controlled, molded, manipulated, hated, and ignored, I am now giving it the space and freedom to do its own thing, and I am excited to see how it is growing. I believe that this is the most grounded that I have ever been in my body, the most patient and calm with its experiences, and the most in tune with its needs and desires.

As a teacher grade six students last year, I was mindful of being very open and loving with my body, so as to provide my students with a model of a body positive woman with curves who embraces every part of herself. They saw that I was active, creative, confident, and comfortable with my body, and I loved to witness them respond to their own changing bodies in more accepting and positive ways, as well. In my classroom, I was mindful of the language that I engaged, as well as the ways in which I spoke naturally and easily about matters pertaining to the body. For example, during “Juicy June”, when all grade six students learned about puberty, I was conscious of teaching the students the proper names of body parts, as opposed to slang; I was also very careful to answer their questions openly and respectfully, to not shame their curiosity and interest in any way. I wanted to be an adult in their lives who would not shame or

criticize them or hide important body-based knowledge from them.

Something that I have noticed within the past year as my body has begun to round, is that the people around me seem to be somewhat confused about my changing shape. I have had many people ask me if I am pregnant, which to me is an insensitive invasion of personal space, and a disrespect of experience. I would love to wear a sign around my neck, or perhaps a t-shirt, that says: “No, I am not pregnant. I have, however, recovered from years of abusing my body, and am listening to it and loving it as is. My belly is a symbol of strength. Please take your ignorant bullshit elsewhere.” Maybe I will actually get a t-shirt like this made. I now know the beauty and worth of my belly, and honour the strength and loyalty that it has provided me throughout the years. Whereas I once battled with my belly, and considered it the enemy, I understand and cherish it now as one of the most beautiful relationships that I have had in my life, and I am consciously choosing to love, appreciate, and respect it for the precious, loyal, and life-giving gift that it is.

Having become a member of a burlesque troupe, I now dance on stage with my stomach (and other parts) exposed in all of its glory, and never once feel ashamed or embarrassed or weak or gluttonous, all feelings that would have coloured my perspective had I danced in front of an audience with my body exposed years ago. Dancing in a burlesque show is a means of honouring my curves and my belly, and inviting my body into an experience of celebration and fun that it most certainly deserves. It is for me, and within me, and in celebration of my beautiful and resilient body. Within my body I am now able to feel grounded within the world, within my choices, within my identity. I am once again looking at the world from the inside out.

## Ebbing and Flowing

Within the past few years, another important understanding that I have developed is that of the correlation between my body and my energy and moods. It is when I am being mindful of my energy – its cultivation and depletion—that I feel the most balanced and whole within my body, mind, and spirit. As an introvert who leads a highly extroverted lifestyle, I have to be mindful where my energy is going, and how I am able to replenish it. Being cautious with my energy is non-negotiable if I am to engage with the world in the energetic, creative manner of my choice; My distinct experiences of high and low energy require me to be in partnership with my energetic needs.

In addition to being sensitive to the rises and falls of energy, I have long been a person of extremes: my moods have oscillated wildly throughout the various experiences of my life. I am still not certain if my moods are simply caused by shifts in energy, or changes in season, or have some other psychological grounding –and nor am I interested in exploring this, having come to value the power and beauty of each of my colours -- but they do shift depending on various factors in my life, and I have to keep myself in balance in order to stop them from becoming extreme.

I used to think that my moods changed in relation to changes in my body: that when connected to my body, my mood was high and full. I also believed that, when disconnected from my body, my mood would crash. However, I am now beginning to think that it could, in fact, be the other way around: that it is actually my moods that are large determinants of the level of connectedness that I feel with my body. I am starting to believe that many of the experiences of my journeying body occurred because of my lack of honouring – rooted in a lack of awareness – of my shifts in energy. Many of my experiences with my body have seemed to me, now in

retrospect, almost manic, and I wonder if I was fighting something that was beyond my recognition or control, and it was instead transferred to fighting against my own body. Others of my experiences are undeniably linked to depression, and I pause to wonder what came first: the disconnection, or the depression, or did they happen at the same time?

These are questions that have been flowing into awareness recently. Maybe I have been fighting my body all of this time, when in actuality, my body was just the innocent by-stander, the one upon whom I was heaping things that I did not or could not understand. This makes me understand even more deeply the interconnectedness of all systems: physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. What this means for me now is that I recognize that, in order for me to stay connected to my body even amidst my shifting energies and moods, I must respect my body's needs, while as the same time, respecting the needs of myself to oscillate, and giving my energy free reign to flow naturally as it does. Just as I have learned to love, appreciate, and respect my body through the experiences of my life, I have also grown a deep appreciation, honouring, and care for my moods and mental health experiences and their interrelatedness with the totality of who I am.

### Examining

I am thus now more empathic to my body as a whole, and what is needed to keep me functioning optimally. Equally enhanced is my awareness of my body as a living system, rather than a simple machine. I am mindful of the different segments of the fingers working in unison, for example, or the fascia enshrouding me from tip to toe. I think more of the preciseness and perfection of my earlobes, as well as the ways in which my toe nails grow without my conscious acknowledgement. I am aware of the things that make my heart physically feel warm, and find myself touching my chest when experiencing emotions of love or loss. I can sense the emergence

and presence of anxiety, and am able to breathe myself through it, and remind myself that it will soon pass. I am aware of how lovely it feels to have someone run their fingers through my hair, or massage my shoulders, and am filled with joy when my kitten kneads my chest while purring, her own little body totally, blissfully alive in the moment.

It is not only the awareness of my own body that has sprouted, but that of the bodies surrounding me. I see the tiny body of my newborn nephew, so complete in its newness, and I am reminded that my body as a baby is the body I have now, and that it, too, is divine in its simplicity. I know my body – as are all bodies – is a miracle in physical form. There is no way to explain or analyze the perfect functioning of the body. Our bodies have a natural intelligence that we will never fully understand: this intelligence is sacred and mysterious, and mysteries do not have to be explained.

### Awakening

Re-connection with my body has re-ignited a desire for me to experience the world in all of its colours and flavours. I love being busy and leading an active life, just as I love being quiet and relishing my solitude. I lived for so many years being numb to the beauty of the world, just existing, and trying to erase my existence at times, that now I feel as if my body is tingling with energy, and it is begging me to soak up experiences of all kinds. And, at the same time, I deeply respect its desire to be calm, quiet, and still at times as well. I am respecting its need to be balanced, whole, and fully experienced, and am trusting in it to keep me healthy and safe as it has always so lovingly and patiently done.

Celebrating the story of my body, I envision an awakening, an opening of every piece of me to the world: the darkness and the light; the weakness and the strength; the fear and the love. My body's narrative now overflows with deep gratitude and appreciation. I am also filled with a

disbelief that I permitted myself to become so disconnected, and, yet, a strong belief in the power and loyalty of my body for bringing me back from some very detached places. I have a newfound appreciation of my body, other people's bodies, and the body of the world. I hold close my understanding of my own body as being a beautiful part of nature, echoing the changes in nature herself. I am also filled with an awareness of purpose, and the idea that, just as every part of nature serves a purpose, so, too, do we all, myself and my body included. I have a profound appreciation of the expansiveness of my journeying body and its story: the beauty, the strength, the purpose, the passion, the creativity, and the magic.