

EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED:
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING
SPIRITUALITY WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE

by

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DECLARATION

'I declare that EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUALITY WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references'

.....
JOAN ELIZABETH COLLETT

.....
Date

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IN PASTORAL THERAPY

ABSTRACT

A postmodern approach is used to examine various discourses with relevance to subject positioning and its effect on individual spirituality. The stories are located within different discourses, introducing a spiritual diversity. Through narrative, a holistic understanding of the spiritual experiences of two contemporary Christian women who have suffered abuse is provided, highlighting spirituality as an essential component to physical and psychosocial well-being.

Contextual post-structural feminist theology and the social construction theory of reality informed this work. The performative function of language in social interaction is emphasised, situating language and relationship as key factors in the construction of individual identity and spirituality. Whilst recognising the constitutive force of discourse, the research highlights the notion that people can exercise choice in opposition to these discursive practices. Elements of spiritual transformation, hope and empowerment surfaced as counter stories to the culture of abuse, providing the scaffolding for re-storying their lives.

Key terms: Deconstruction, discourse, empowerment, hope, identity, language, narrative, positioning, relationship, spirituality

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PROLOGUE

Setting the scene: important considerations in the development of the research process

This research study investigated the spirituality of two women participants, Diana and Louise, who had both been exposed to domestic and emotional abuse. Prior to commencing the research project, I assisted them both therapeutically as part of my practical training programme for a Master's degree in Practical Theology.

Approximately one year later, the participants were amongst the women who responded to my invitation to participate in the research project which is set out in this study. (Letters written to the research participants explaining the research project and their role as co-investigators are attached – see Appendices A and B). Our conversations pertinent to the investigation around the research topic took place over approximately three months. During this time the participants and I created transcripts which represented aspects of field experience which eventually became our field texts 'constituting tales of the field', a term borrowed from Van Maanen (quoted in Denzin 1994:500). With the permission of the participants, some documents compiled prior to the enquiry and for a different purpose were included in the field texts when they became relevant to the enquiry.

I would like to emphasise just how important and valuable I believe my relationship with the participants and their ongoing stories is. I believe it is the various 'ingredients' contained in our relationship that shaped the interpretative process which created significance in the text and gave structure to the research in its final form. Without knowing the relationship between myself and the research participants, the reader has no way of knowing how the research process moved from field experience, to field text, to research text (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:419).

In line with many feminist researchers, I take the position that 'closeness with women is necessary in order to understand them' (Reinharz 1992:67). 'Researcher relationships to ongoing participant stories shape the nature of field texts and establish the epistemological status of them.....What is told, as well as the meaning of what is told, is shaped by the relationship' (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:419). Openness to intimacy and striving for empathy also required an openness to complete transformation on my part as researcher. I believe

the conclusions reached are very different when we observe and record events from a distance as opposed to when we actively participate as co-enquirers in the process (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:422).

In considering the above, and in deciding which method to use in creating our field texts, I was aware that the process cannot be value free; instead, I recognise that the methods for studying the 'lived experiences' of individuals are always personal. Within a postmodern framework, the 'doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the "right" or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge' (Richardson 1994:517) meant that in order to be 'original' in the method I had chosen, I had to free my imagination to find an approach that would enable me to deal appropriately with the research questions. I had to acknowledge that writing about any experience is always very different from the 'raw' experience itself; that 'lived experience' can only be given indirectly, through textual representations. That being the case, what became most important for me as a researcher was to narrow the distance between the 'experiencing' subjects and their accounts of their 'lived' experiences (Ellis & Flaherty 1992a:4). I tried to avoid treating women research participants merely as data providers, which would have undermined the importance of their subjective feelings in a mapping of social experience.

From field to field text

The method I followed collecting field experience and creating a field text closely matches the model developed in 1981 by British sociologist Ann Oakley. This model affirmed that there can be a contradiction between 'scientific' interviewing, aimed at collecting objective data, and feminist research, where openness, collaborative involvement and the structuring of a potentially enduring relationship are important factors (Reinharz 1992:27). A feminist ethic of interviewing leads to 'informant structured interviews' in which the researcher confirms to the interviewee that she values her as a person. Under such conditions it becomes incongruous for 'interpretation and analysis to remain the prerogative of the investigator'; instead, narratives are contoured and nuanced in ways which 'fuse data and interpretation'. The story line largely structures the interpretative framework through which data is constructed (Graham, quoted in Reinharz 1992:30). In this case, because the research participants were encouraged to be flexible in the reconstruction of their personal narratives, interaction was structured along the lines of an oral conversation.

I believe that entering the research process with a set of questions has the potential of creating conditions where the interviewee becomes a 'surface speaking self' instead of an

'inner feeling self' (Goffman, quoted in Ellis & Flaherty 1992a:2). Our interaction provided conditions where we became co-equals conversing about mutually relevant, critical issues, given our position as women in society today. This type of conversation entailed respectful listening; my response sometimes constituting a gentle probe into their experience in order to promote thick descriptions. These descriptions provided the context of an experience and stated the intentions and meaning behind the experience. Probing was always low key, in a situation of 'mutual trust, listening and caring for the experience described by the other' (Clandinin & Connelly 1994:422). My method for gathering field experience constituted a moving away 'from information gathering where the focus is on the right questions, to interaction, where the focus is on the process' (Anderson & Jack 1991:17), where both the *lives* of participants became visible and their *voices* became audible.

From our audio-taped field notes I constructed what became a field text. Always mindful of the fact that I had entered into a relationship with the participants with certain intentions and purposes directed towards the research, my transcripts were first read by my supervisor and then by the participants to enable them as participants to edit or delete any parts as they saw fit. Throughout the research journey, scheduled over several meetings, further texts were collected whilst I collaborated with the participants regarding the 'plot' outlines as well as the development of further points of importance. The field text provided me with a working document which came to form my initial attempt to try to understand and make meaning of the stories I had been a witness to.

From field text to research text

When I constructed the field texts, I stayed close to what I saw, heard and experienced so that the texts tended to be descriptive and to be shaped around certain events. Moving from the field text to the research text involved me in a complex, reflexive process as I remained mindful of two issues – first, working out how to write authentically about the lives of the participants and, second, remembering for whom I was writing (Richardson 1990:9).

I dedicated my care and responsibility to the participants in terms of the way in which the research aimed to bring about growth and transformation for them, as well as the way in which the research text will ultimately shape their lives. At the same time, I also regard it as part of my responsibility to provide the larger field and research community with a research text purposefully structured to influence the discourse and practices of those beyond the immediate research field. This writing is not only for the self, but also for others; and this

purpose coincides with the research text: 'Just as serving the self serves the community, so too serving the community in research texts also serves the self' (Denzin 1994:425).

Crafting the research text constituted an ongoing conversation with an audience. I wanted to shape the text in ways that would invite you, the reader, to share in the co-authors' experiences – I wanted to be 'true' to the lived reality of the participants. The act of writing, the reflexive, interpretative process involved in crafting a research text, constitutes the telling of another story, a different story. How could I make my material 'new' with riveting detail, so that through interpretation I would take the reader into the centre of the 'lived experiences' described by the participants? From this perspective I came to understand fully that my writing of the research text constitutes certain intentions which makes writing a moral site (Richardson 1990:10). As researcher I too 'weigh and sift experiences, make choices regarding what is significant, what is trivial, what to include, what to exclude. I do not simply chronicle "what happened next", but place the "next" in a meaningful context. By doing so I craft a narrative, I write lives' (Richardson 1990:10).

Working within the postmodern context of doubt, I started to write the research text comforted by the idea that no method constituted the 'right' way, that no method earned a privileged status. What was important was to give careful consideration to how the participants' perspectives and experiences are documented in the text, whilst also writing with a commitment not to 'brutalise, shock or alienate the reader' (Carver, quoted in Denzin 1994:505).

The research text, its authority and style

Ronai (1992:123) argues that literary forms of writing have the potential to imprison lived experiences; yet without form or structure, it would be impossible to convey any experience. In order for the research text to find a place in public discourse, I looked at the staging of the text, experimenting with narrative as form, allowing form and content to intertwine, crucial considerations in its crafting. It was also my objective to create a vibrant text, keeping the 'plot' moving along, developing character through specific actions.

Reading through and reliving the stories evoked strong emotional feelings about the abuse suffered by the participants. I believe this response also helped me to relate to and interpret the material differently, perhaps setting the tone for evocative writing through *narratives of the self* (Richardson 1994:521). *Narratives of the self* embrace a deeply personal biography in which an author tells stories about her own lived experience (Richardson 1994:521).

Arranging the text in this way corresponded with my goal, of taking you, our reader, on a journey in which you could 'experience' the events as they happened, hoping that the text would create a feeling of 'what it was like' at the time (Krieger, quoted in Ellis & Bochner 1992:80).

In line with the above, the research text was written with the purpose of being performed; the audience was exposed to much more than words; 'they see facial expressions, movements and gestures, they hear the tones, intonations and inflections of the actors' voices; they can feel the passion of the performers' (Conquergood, quoted in Ellis & Bochner 1992:98). Through this form of writing, the text provides a medium whereby understanding is not so much reached through the embedded meaning of experience, but is instead achieved through an ongoing 'experiencing of the experience' (Ellis & Bochner 1992:98). Readers are placed in a position that allows them to imagine not only how it was for us, but how it could be or once was for them. They are made aware of similarities and differences between their worlds and ours; 'seeing' the other in themselves (Ellis & Bochner 1992:80). The audience is moved to deal with the concrete detail of people's lives; they interact with particular people in particular places in face-to-face encounters.

Relying on the 'evidence' in the story to do the work, I set out to structure the material into interpretative frameworks; arranging it in terms of themes, to create further 'news' I could carry from my world to that of the audience. In the process of having to make the text 'new', I had to find things out for myself. Lather (1991:91) states that we have moved from 'objective' description to inscription. By structuring the text into interpretative frameworks, I tried to wed unseen meaning with behaviour, so that the frameworks demand analysis of themselves as cultural products. I attempted to give meaning to the 'social actions of [the] actors whose actions they are, stating as clearly as possible what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which we live' (Geertz 1973:27). I wanted to discover how metaphor, images and story lines contributed to their being spoken into existence. The persons whose stories I had recorded in fragmented and disjointed narratives were no longer alien and strange, nor even foolish, because I can now 'see' how they were being discursively constituted. I set out by working within the constraints of available discourses to constitute them as comprehensible, knowable and worthwhile. This form of writing 'relives and reinscribes, bringing newly discovered meanings to the reader' (Denzin 1994:504), whilst at the same time opening up a particular cultural world.

Conditions of emotional and authentic understanding are further created by the way the text attempts to bring alive to the reader a particular world through what has been described and

inscribed. Denzin (1994:506) states that 'authentic understanding is created when readers are able to live their way into an experience that has been described and interpreted'. Furthermore, by allowing the narrative to keep on moving ahead whilst staying with the plot, literary criteria of coherence, plausibility and interest were sought.

Diana's story introduces the reader to a situation comprising much spiritual diversity and uncertainty in the midst of abusive circumstances. Through her story an understanding is created of how people are constituted through and in terms of existing discourse; how the concept of positioning within discourse becomes central to understanding her story, causing an anti-spiritual modality maintained by the power of the dominant story of abuse.

The story of Louise tells of spiritual strength and resilience running counter to her experience of abuse; these stories of spiritual sustenance and strength provide an alternative knowledge about the self, a counterplot, bringing hope and empowerment.

These personal narratives provide accounts of how a new sense of self emerges through the circumstances and events these two women experienced. Their stories produce visions of self that reveal qualities of personal character, resistance, resilience and accomplishment. Ultimately, their lives, illuminated with new meanings and a transformation of the self, are depicted.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH STORY

1.1 OPENING THE THERAPEUTIC DOOR TO SPIRITUALITY

Until recently we have had only a limited understanding of the complex process of coping and adaptation, because research in this area has focused essentially on objective and empirical data and has largely ignored and/or minimised the influence of individual subjective experiences (Do Rozario 1997:428). In present day culture the problem has been exacerbated because the religious and spiritual aspects of people's lives often seem to be overlooked or avoided by therapists (Carlson & Erickson 2000:66). This is further complicated by the fact that there is also a serious lack of professional literature addressing spirituality and/or the exploration of religious frameworks in therapeutic practice.

However, there would appear to be an urgent need for the inclusion of spirituality as a resource in client adjustment and functioning, because a recent survey found that 86% of the family therapists surveyed believed that there is a relationship between spiritual and mental health (Carlson & Erickson 2000:66). There is increasing evidence to suggest that it is the person's 'discretionary system – that is, a person's inner and inter-actional world of values, beliefs, attitudes and inspiration – that helps to mediate, buffer and determine the process of successful coping' (Do Rozario 1997:428). Often, when people faced with problem situations and demands for change are imminent, individuals turn to their inner selves for truths, abandoning the notion that reliance on others can provide knowledge and direction (Belenky et al 1986:51). Griffith and Griffith (2002:6) state that a relationship with a personal God can provide possibilities for healing, particularly when human relationships are absent or distant.

The counselling profession has struggled to integrate issues of spirituality fully into their work because of the subjective and mutable nature of spirituality (Everts & Agee 1994:291). Because spirituality is such a rich and diverse concept, therapists have been considering the issue with great sensitivity, especially because declarative statements about this multi-diverse concept have the potential to limit the richness and expansion of spirituality in individual lives. However, in searching for alternative knowledge which could contribute to healthier ways of living and improved coping mechanisms, more counsellors are now according attention to the spiritual and religious experiences of their clients as a prerequisite for effective clinical work (Griffith & Griffith 2002; Carlson & Erickson 2000; Northcut 2000).

1.2 THE MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY IN THIS PROJECT

This project to investigate the role of spirituality in abusive circumstances was undertaken with two participants, two women who have been abused and whose spirituality is expressed within religious frameworks which are Christian, in the context of a Western spirituality. Two spiritual discourses emerged. The first focused attention on a disabling spirituality which restricted personal agency in all decision-making processes, a spirituality that was in solidarity with a reliance on external authority for its growth and meaning. This kind of experience is well argued by Ochs (1983:27), who states that although spirituality can be a domain of creativity and wholeness, it can also be the place where individuals suffer most when they ignore the careful exploration of themselves and their relationships. That is, as we engage more fully in our commitment to ourselves and the world, we tend to build a spirituality that seems to fulfil the demands of living. The second discourse revealed a more enabling spirituality which served as a resource for wellness in the face of abuse and pain. The study thus illustrates that spirituality as a life-giving force provides a resource of strength and support, but can also have the potential to be disabling, a source of suffering caused by and occasioning doubt and alienation (Everts & Agee 1994:294).

Ultimately, spirituality within the scope of the project emerges as 'having to do with a person's innermost being and its connection with a Divine presence, which gives purpose and meaning to people's lives' (Everts & Agee 1994:291). Some writers have defined this as 'subjective engagement with the fourth dimension of human experience, transcendent of the limitations of time, space and language' (Anderson & Worthen 1997:5). For both participants in the study, their spiritual resources have involved an awareness of their own inner power; which in turn could be nurtured to ultimately strengthen their personal and social lives. The relational dimension of spirituality is emphasised, involving behaviour that stretches into every area of life and which may or may not include the practice of a particular religion (Anderson & Worthen 1997:5). As such, spirituality emerged as an important meaning-making aspect of individual life and can serve as a powerful resource for wholeness and healing (Tisdell 2000:321).

1.3 SPIRITUALITY AS RELATEDNESS AND CONNECTION

Griffith (1995:127) states that denominational group beliefs are often poor predictors of a person's experience of God. Griffith and Griffith (2002:232) write that religious beliefs can have such a powerful influence as to preclude the voice of God from having a meaningful influence in shaping individual spirituality.

As a conscious component of individual life, it can be argued that spirituality is embedded in issues to do with intimate relationships, child-rearing practices, religious frameworks and world views. When people are spiritually heedful, they discover themselves not as separate and isolated, but essentially as connected and engaged (Walsh 1999:275). It is through a reflection on relationships and behaviour, and individual meanings attached to these lived experiences, that spirituality emerges. Griffith and Griffith (2002:220) suggest that social constructs of separation, together with boundaries of exclusion and division, religious or otherwise, can seriously impede and violate the relatedness on which spirituality is built. Religious and cultural barriers, especially those determining the roles of women, can contribute to vulnerability in people when spirituality becomes a disembodied experience. Moreover, adversity in the form of abuse and conflict can become a determining factor shaping embodied spiritual growth, with spirituality providing some form of security. The watching eyes of a personal God provide the final standard of justice and injustice (Griffith & Griffith 1994:6), so that the God-self relationship offers a rich resource for constructing meaning out of the chaos and randomness of life.

Enabling the participants to understand their own spirituality evolved through a process of acquiring self-knowledge and becoming more self-aware, something which was given impetus by their experiences of abuse, trauma and conflict. Spirituality encompassed the ways in which they have had to organise their lives in the light of this growing self-awareness, the emergence of which gave spirituality its applicability and interpretation so that it became manifest in their attitudes, behaviours and purposes. Both participants recognised hardship as a 'learning experience', helping them to grow stronger, and in the process enriching their personal connections to the Divine. Spirituality provided a resource for them from which they could draw their own and new knowledges to create a preferred narrative and thus a new life.

1.4 THE DIVIDE BETWEEN CLINICAL AND FAITH-BASED APPROACHES TO PRACTICE

Given the renewed interest in spirituality and also the fact that the 1994 fall edition of the *Journal of Systemic Therapy* was devoted to spirituality as a powerful tool towards health and healing (Hamilton & Jackson 1998:265), one may ask why the spiritual aspects of clients' lives has remained an unexplored part of the therapy process for so long. What has blocked the voice of spirituality from being welcomed and listened to in client adjustment and functioning?

1.4.1 Modern perspectives: is spirituality value-laden and unreliable?

Western technologically oriented cultures which value rationalism and objectivity have contributed to the stereotype which labels women's thinking emotional and intuitive. They have thus played a part in the devaluation of women's minds and contributions (Sampson, referred to in Belenky et al 1986:6).

It is generally assumed that intuitive knowledge (spirituality) is unreliable and vague and therefore less valuable than objective modes of knowing, or scientific evaluation (Belenky et al 1986:6). Given also that most people in the helping professions, such as psychologists, social workers and counsellors, have been trained in rationality and modernist-positivist scientific paradigms and that their perceptual frameworks have been shaped by this training, an exploration into alternative forms of knowledge acquisition may indeed pose a challenge (Hamilton & Jackson 1998:263). Instead of seeking to identify and align themselves with the client's story, in particular the way in which it is influenced by and related to the larger constructions of reality; counsellors and other health professionals have been set on making the right diagnosis in order to be scientific (Prest & Keller 1993:139). On the other hand, because of a reluctance on the part of therapists to encourage a new type of conversation, clients may be unsure about whether it would be appropriate to talk about God, religion or their sense of spirituality during therapy.

1.4.2 The mind-body problem: severing the body from subjective experiences

A Western point of view favouring scientific evaluation and objectification has for long supported the assumption that it is possible to separate the care of the body from the care of the spiritual dimension of the person (Ross 1994:7). Many who have written about the body tend to separate it from subjective experiences, viewing emotional and cognitive responses

as competing perspectives, instead of being indistinct in a person's flow of experiences (Denzin, quoted in Ellis & Flaherty 1992:3).

1.4.3 Religion and spirituality: enabling or constrictive?

For many people, religion and spirituality may be interwoven, with religion providing a framework within which spirituality can flourish. Others have felt the need to divorce the two when individual spirituality can only grow outside religion. Rossouw (1993:900) writes that the church has adopted a type of communication whereby religious information is conveyed to its members from the top down. When the gospel message becomes a set of rules to be followed, people strive to become religiously perfect, something which can easily be mistaken for spiritual growth (Heise & Steitz 1991:21). This process of mastering and comprehending knowledge focuses solely on the content of what is to be learned, and little consideration is given to the subjective experiences that might have an impact on the lives of people, creating uncertainty regarding the relationship between themselves and God.

1.4.4 The old, old story of patriarchy

The church has long been in collusion with patriarchy, with pastors often torn by theological perspectives that seem to be in conflict with the best interests of women. Griffith and Griffith (2002:226) write that in religiously patriarchal societies social arrangements between people are often hierarchically structured by radical fundamentalism, leading to the exploitation of and control over women. How women view themselves and their life conditions is formed in the context of church and community. Conditions which are not supportive to the way in which women's subjective experiences are determined and shaped by their surrounding contexts constrain women from co-authoring an ongoing story with God that is uniquely their own (Griffith 1995:137). Given the above, it becomes important to understand how constraining beliefs, negative religious experiences or a spiritual void may contribute to distress that blocks healing and growth (Walsh 1999:3).

1.4.5 Metaphors – opening or closing possibilities for spirituality and healing

Kolbenschlag (1982:160) writes that although the psychology of the experience of God is highly subjective and personal, religious language has shaped a perception of God that is male, autocratic and judgmental. It is primarily through our image of God that we experience and interpret our relationship with God, and that we are better able to understand ourselves and our place in creation. When the possibility for those images is limited by inner conflict,

and God is viewed as emotionally distant or indifferent, our ability to experience God's unlimited abundance is weakened. 'How God is named, imagined and conceptualised significantly affects how we understand ourselves, how we understand our purpose in life, how we order our social and familiar relationships and how we structure our culture' (Neuger 2001:12).

Rigid conceptions of God, images which combine authority, power and maleness, can contribute to the construction of norms defining manhood and masculinity (Neuger 2001:13). Moreover, if males are regarded as being closer to the image of God than females and are therefore 'naturally' created to do more 'godlike' things, this can have serious implications for some women in terms of how they view their own sacredness (Neuger 2001:13).

1.5 A CHALLENGE FOR PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL COUNSELLING

In developing spirituality as an asset in therapeutic work, we need to draw on a theology which takes seriously 'the broken relations between self and body, self and others, self and nature, self and God, as creating not just false images but also broken existence – alienations which get expressed in exploitative social patterns' (Radford Ruether, quoted in Harris 1988:11). Fischer (1988:2) writes that 'it has become so much part of our consciousness that the way the church and society are presently structured seems to be the way things naturally are, that with the support of religion certain structures appear to be divinely ordained'. Given this background, theological issues play a crucial part in developing an appropriate pastoral counselling approach to women. Unless pastoral care challenges some of the 'traditional' doctrines that support patriarchy, I believe pastoral care cannot provide a safe and healing environment for women who have been or still are victims of abuse.

Over the past twenty-five years, feminist research has attempted to unravel the complex manner in which the subjective experiences of women are inter-twined with their lived bodily experiences, given their positioning as women (Neuger & Poling 1997:24). Research on subjectivity indicates that the spirituality of women cannot be separated from their social contexts; instead, by analysing the religious, social and cultural forces that condition individual spirituality over time, their stories indicate how changes across these domains affect and change their subjective experiences (Gagnon 1992:231).

For many women, empowerment suggests a move away from an externally oriented perspective (reliance on others for knowledge and truth), which results in a new conception of truth as 'personal, private and subjectively known' (Belenky et al 1986:54). The growing reliance of women on their subjective experiences is therefore regarded as an important adaptive move towards self-knowledge; fostering greater autonomy and independence (Belenky et al 1986:54). The discovery of inner power in the way of their spiritual self is synonymous with a transformation of the view they have about themselves and their world (Belenky et al 1986:57).

If the way by which we can reach God is revealed to us through the knowledge of our own being, the knowledge of our inherent quality and desires, then the challenge to theology and pastoral counselling is the ability to view and interpret the diverse ways in which people do or do not construct spirituality in their lives. Theological lenses which do not contribute to life-giving and empowering processes, or which do not allow people's lives to express criticism of theological interpretations, do more harm than good (Neuger 2001:9).

1.6 RESEARCH CURIOSITY

As a pastoral therapist in training, I have listened to the stories told by several women who have suffered domestic abuse. Often spiritual issues became a factor in the conversation, sometimes as a disabling spirituality, in other instances as a source of empowerment. I became curious about those spiritual discourses, about individual sources of spiritual strength, and how women can connect to spiritual talk in ways that would be healing and strengthening.

1.7 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Acknowledging that the concept of spirituality is complex and represents multiple and diverse lived experiences, the aims and objectives of the study were

- to deconstruct women's spirituality;
- to reconstruct women's spirituality;
- to discover/recover an empowering / healing spirituality for women; and
- to use a healing spirituality to address / re-dress abusive circumstances.

1.8 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research was conducted within the framework of a postmodern epistemology. Within this framework I made use of

- narrative or story-telling as a guiding metaphor, linked to the social construction theory of reality, for an account of individual lived experiences; and
- contextual post-structural feminist theology for doing practical theology and pastoral counselling serving as an interpretive lens through which to view society and its interwoven relationships.

1.8.1 A postmodern epistemology

1.8.1.1 A postmodern versus a modern world view

Perhaps the most important feature of the postmodern world view is the stand it takes regarding reality or the construction of reality, especially in terms of what constitutes knowledge and how and for whom knowledge is constructed (Richardson 1990:12). It argues that there can be no objective facts, no single truth, that reality is not something that can be constructed irrespective of its knower but that the socio-economic political reality of the knower is decisive for knowledge (Brueggemann 1993:9). Hence, there are no universal criteria for truth; claims to knowledge are always contextual (Zuber-Skerrit 1996:68).

On the other hand, if an argument develops within the framework of a modernist world view, it holds that objective facts can be found independent of the values, beliefs and world view of the observer, that these facts can be grouped together in an overarching theory which suggests a close approximation of an understanding of reality. When people invest in this world view they do not regard their ideas as speculation, but claim that their ideas represent truths about an underlying reality we all share. The 'objectivity' of a modernistic viewpoint emphasises rigidity and control, facts, replicable procedures and rules that can be applied elsewhere if the same phenomenon is studied and ignores the local meanings contained in the lives of people (Freedman & Combs 1996:20).

1.8.1.2 *Postmodern perspectives of power and control*

Given the above, the postmodern paradigm suggests that I look at things in new ways. It also suggests that I look at new things, given the changing nature of the world in which we live (Zuber-Skerrit 1996:167). Hence the postmodern paradigm is characterised by a new consciousness that doubts all previous archetypes (Denzin & Lincoln 1994a:2).

Its standpoint that there can be no objective truth is based on the premise that there is an essential relationship between discourses (systems of knowledge) by which people arrange their lives, and the practices of domination and control in local contexts (Foucault, quoted in Stringer 1999:196). Discourses regulate people's behaviour because they make powerful claims as to what constitutes truth. 'A community of discourse is a cultural creation which allows for social norms to be dictated through a complex web of social interchange mediated through various forms of power relationships' (Shotter, quoted in Madigan 1996:50). Within a postmodern framework, research which intends participation in personal, familial and cultural transformation needs to be willing to question anything that assumes 'truth' status in the dominant culture.

Postmodern theory obtains much of its influence from the way it deconstructs discourse. Deconstructive methods provide the ability to take apart 'truths' and see them as perspectives that, in many circumstances, privilege certain groups and disadvantage others. Research within this framework requires interpretation of a story through a variety of meaningful lenses, asking the epistemological question 'How do we know what we know?' (Neuger 2001:129).

1.8.1.3 *Alternative knowledges, new voices*

Postmodern thought with its emphasis on alternative forms of knowledge acquisition has made space for previously subjugated and marginalised knowledges, those which cannot be manipulated or controlled, being derived from emotion and intuition (Gorman, quoted in Damianakis 2001:25). For a long time, the voice of spirituality has not been 'licensed' in many therapeutic contexts because of its 'unreliability' in terms of the criteria for factual, objective data (Damianakis 2001:23).

Within a postmodern framework, knowledge acquisition by means of subjective influences is regarded as one of its greatest strengths; the more subjective the information, the closer it is to representing the client's lived experiences. It is within these experiences that alternative

stories which promote health and healing are assumed to be the most likely to develop. Hence postmodern thought has introduced greater openness, allowing talks about a personal God, situating these experiences within the framework of the client, something previously excluded in therapeutic circles in the construction of solution-focused knowledges. Griffith (1995:123) suggests that 'justice' and openness in counselling happens when clients are able to tell their stories as they are experienced – even if these should include God.

1.8.2 The narrative approach: ideas shaping a narrative perspective

The most inclusive meaning of the term 'narrative' refers to any spoken or written conferral. More specific meaning of the term refers to a 'kind of organisational scheme expressed in story form' (Polkinghorne 1988:13). Narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organises human experiences or events into temporally significant episodes. Hence the narrative can be seen as the primary frame through which people make sense of their experiences (Polkinghorne 1988:36).

The organising theme that identifies the significance and the role of the individual events contained in the narrative is normally called the 'plot' (Polkinghorne 1988:143). The process whereby we plot individual events into a narrative comes naturally as part of our daily experiences, so that we are normally not aware of its operation, but only of the experience of reality that it produces (Polkinghorne 1988:160). The 'plot' functions to reassemble an account of events into a schematic whole by giving meaning and significance to the contribution that certain events make to the progress and outcome of the story (Polkinghorne 1988:143). Therefore the narrative consists of more than the events alone, it consists also of the significance these events have for the narrator in relation to a particular theme. The narrative is able to take into account the historical and social context in which the events took place and to recognise the significance of particular and unusual content. Accordingly, the meaning of events in the stories is produced by a recognition of how an event and the plot interact, each providing form for the other (Polkinghorne 1988:143).

The aim of using narrative as metaphor is an attempt to understand better the operations which provide the narrative with meaning and structure and to comprehend more fully the implications this meaning has for understanding reality (Polkinghorne 1988:6). Hence, making use of narrative as metaphor provides a means of conceiving the process by which societal discourse and its construction of norms can be seen to operate and inform our sense of who we are in the world.

Based on the work of Michel Foucault on discourses and discourse analysis, Michael White suggests that most stories people tell draw on the dominant discourse, so that their stories, which entail a certain view of reality as they understand it, are subjugated to serve the dominant discourse, defining a culture and maintaining a *status quo* (Parry & Doan 1994:17). 'Culture selects versions of stories to legitimate and others to deny, repress, marginalise and obscure' (Weingarten 1995:9). Because of the 'taken-for-granted' status of discourses, these are internalised and, although we may be subject to a multitude of discourses every day, we may not recognise them as such. Whether we are aware of the discourse or not, we are ourselves constituted through discourse, explaining why discourses have the ability to powerfully shape the stories we tell about ourselves, others and the world (Weingarten 1995:13).

It follows that the stories people tell are not individually 'written', but are the result of societal discourses that affect our everyday relationships with others and which become the themes of our own individual narratives. The themes within these narratives have us explain events in our lives in particular ways; this is not only a process which occurs retrospectively but is also a generative dynamic which constructs particular understandings and meaning(s) of events as they take place. By looking in detail at how this happens, many opportunities for change can be highlighted and thereby made available for future use.

1.8.3 The social construction of reality: an art of lenses

Gergen (1985:266) states that 'social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world in which they live'.

Accordingly it can be argued that social constructionism is concerned with human understanding; it not the issue of '*what* we understand but *how we come to know*' (Krippendorff 1991:7). The approach suggests that knowledge acquisition happens through a 'recursive process of constructing realities that constitutively involves the self' (Krippendorff 1991:115). 'Social constructionism emphasises the social construction of emotions, identities, interpersonal relationships in the language used by individuals; that is, in their *discourse*' (Krippendorff 1991:115). It follows that all discourses are formed through language and the language people use to construct their world and themselves in important ways (Richardson 1994:518). On the basis of this constructed experience we understand ourselves and the world, and we make decisions regarding how we will act. However, when language is used to create conditions of 'otherness' in which individuals are seen as

marginalised or different, language constructs and shapes subjective feelings and identities, often toward pathology (Foucault, cited in Damianakis 2001:26).

Thus language does not have an innocent and transparent function in knowledge production but its narrative structures constitute reality. Language does not reflect a social reality that is objectively out there; rather the spoken or written word *is* reality, it is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of the world and of the self (Richardson 1990:12). We make use of language to actively 'construct' reality; in so doing we pay attention to certain conditions rather than others, and this process is influenced by our choices, convictions, desires and social backgrounds (Ravn 1991:98). We learn to interpret and experience our world through language. As we cannot know our world in any real sense because it is always mediated by language, language constitutes all there is to know about ourselves, others and the world in which we live (Richardson 1994:518).

It follows that the emphasis on knowledge acquisition is thus not on the individual mind, knowledge is not something people have in their heads; knowledge is generated in the way people construct reality as together they produce descriptions and explanations in language (Gergen & Gergen 1991:78). From the constructionist standpoint, 'language is the vehicle which, through the activities of people, produces knowledge which is applied to accomplish locally agreed upon purposes concerning the *real* and the *good*' (Gergen & Gergen 1991:78). Social constructionism can therefore be regarded as a lens which not only takes a position against that which is regarded to be objective truth, but also against common and uncritically accepted criteria for that which is 'good'.

The participants, Diana and Louise, expressed their spirituality as an accumulation of different knowledges gathered from our culture and tradition and from their daily experiences of life. When they sought to express or represent certain aspects of their spirituality, they drew from cultural discourses around them and made use of language to emphasise meaning around their spirituality. The language they were *in* brought knowledge which limited or made possible what they understood about spirituality (Andersen 1993:304). Accordingly, it is argued that spirituality is not a fixed reality, consisting of particular 'truths', but that it is rather constructed and defined contextually by means of social construction discourse. Culture provided Louise and Diana with different understandings or images of God so that by means of the language they were *in* and surrounded *with*, metaphors or images strongly affected how they viewed their covenant with God, how they spoke about God and lived their faith; determining whether their relationship with God was an intimate partnership of mutuality or an exacting relationship of yielding submission.

It is against this taken-for-granted knowledge that social construction takes a stand, particularly against the way in which language constructs certain forms of knowledge, thereby establishing values with which people endow their lives. If Diana and Louise were in and surrounded with different knowledges and language they would live differently (Andersen 1993:305) and have different ideas about spirituality.

1.9 THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Conducting research within the framework of a postmodern epistemology implies the view that there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual; for there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the researcher and the participants. In addition, the stories people tell can seldom be a full account of their actions and activities. It is consistent with postmodernist thinking that no single method can fully explain the subtle variations in ongoing human experience.

The research design rests on the question 'What do I want to know in this study'? (Janesick 1994:210). Because the concepts of spirituality are complex and represent multiple realities that cannot be rigorously measured, a qualitative research design is well suited to this type of investigation (Hamilton & Jackson 1998:263). This design serves as a foundation for obtaining an understanding of the participants' worlds and of the meaning of their experiences.

1.10 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH VERSUS QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

1.10.1 The research relationship – people, participants or objects: the cornerstone of qualitative research

My principal interest in sharing the lived world of the participants was the growth and transformation in their life stories. The relationship between myself and the participants was the most important issue in the research process, as it determined what information was shared, which questions were asked, and how experience was interpreted and reconstructed into an appropriate text form.

Blumer (quoted in Fontana & Frey 1994:373) makes a plea for us to 'let the methods dictate our images of human beings'. It was important that the research design complemented ways in which I viewed the people about whom I wrote. Oakley (1981:41) states that 'to learn

about people we must remember to treat them as people and they will uncover their lives to us'. Hence, in order to establish rapport, trust and authentic communication, it is necessary to remain mindful that access and entry into the life stories of people always remain sensitive components in qualitative research.

McTaggart (1997a:28) states that authentic participation on the part of the participants implies ownership of the project, that is responsible agency in the production of knowledge and improvement of practice. Tandon (1988:13) has identified several determinants of authentic participation in research:

- people's roles in setting the agenda of inquiry;
- people's participation in gathering material and its interpretation; and
- people's control over the use of outcomes and the whole process.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, is often comfortable with collating information on people *en masse* without communicating with them personally. The complex and subjective nature of lived experiences cannot be fully understood when the research design dictates collating numbers or, even more tragically, analysing individuals into statistical sets. 'It is time to return to a discourse on the personal, on what it means to be alive. Science has for too long dictated our research thereby decontextualising individuals' (Janesick 1994:217). Thus it is important to allow the development of a closer relation between the researcher and participant, with a view to minimising status differences and removing traditional hierarchies in research (Reinharz 1992:22). Moreover, in order to learn about myself through learning from the 'other', I cannot remain an objective, faceless researcher but can only become more human when I share myself in trying to learn from the 'other'.

1.10.2 Validity and reliability

The traditional method of data collection and interpretation, based on a relationship of distance between researcher and participant, minimised the involvement of the participant(s) and provided a one-sided and inevitably inaccurate account of events (that of the researcher). In order for the research to be honest, morally sound and reliable, participants must ideally be treated as equals as far as possible.

As a qualitative researcher, I influence what parts of the data will be reported and how such data is recorded. Validity in qualitative research has a great deal to do with description and explanation, which must be credible. Moreover, the participants' reviewing and qualifying of all written texts is of the utmost importance in qualitative research so that all accounts of their

lived experiences are captured from the participants' point of view (Denzin & Lincoln 1994a:6). Furthermore, I found it useful to remember that the research does not wish to test a predetermined hypothesis but rather to report multiple realities, so that in stressing the socially constructed nature of reality, the focus of the research is on the participants and the way in which they construct meaning in their lives throughout (Denzin & Lincoln 1998:8).

1.10.3 Data collection and analysis

The word 'qualitative' implies and emphasises processes and meanings that are not strictly investigated in terms of quantity, severity and number (Denzin & Lincoln 1998:8). Qualitative research, with its focus on 'experience near' language and rich descriptions of lived experiences, emphasises the properties and nature of the relationships, activities and situations in the lives of the people who formed part of the investigation.

Because of the richness of the concept, spirituality does not lend itself to 'objective' observation or categorisation of data. However, the quantitative research model is based on the assumption that the lived experiences of individuals lend themselves to objective forms of measurement where data is recorded through mathematical models, statistical tables and graphs, analysing causal relationships between variables, not processes (Hamilton & Jackson 1998:263). Quantitative research seeks to answer questions of 'how much' or 'how well' (Hamilton & Jackson 1998:263). The inadequacy of this approach lies in the method itself, when researchers try to establish the meaning of texts. 'By breaking them down into quantifiable units (words, expressions) analysts destroy the very object they are supposed to be studying' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994b:359). Qualitative research analysis, on the other hand, would seek to read narratives with the purpose of 'analysing the narrative, temporal and dramatic structures of the text, forsaking the rigor of counting, for a close interpretive reading of the subject matter at hand' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994b:359).

1.10.4 The process of transformation: becoming decision-makers in their own lives

Janesick (1994:217) suggests that we have lost the human and earnest element of research. She contends that 'becoming immersed in a study requires passion, passion for people, passion for communication and passion for understanding people'. In qualitative research we need to look at the participants' own activities, their lives and social realities which are meant to be transformed by the ongoing inquiry (McTaggart 1997b:2). The question to be asked is 'What has changed as a result of the commitment to participatory research in this context?' (McTaggart 1997b:5). 'Learning' becomes a spiritual experience when people connect with

and practice what they are – they become the actors in their lives, subjects of their own lives and learning instead of objects positioned to function in terms of a given discourse. Transformation is not about acquiring knowledge from external authority (reliance on others) but about a change from within, brought about by new ideas concerning the concept of self, informed by new knowledge and skills (Vella 2000:7).

1.11 AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

1.11.1 Contextual Theology

Mary Pellauer (quoted in Neuger 2001:71) states ‘if there is anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people’s stories – listening to them and honouring and cherishing them’. It stands to reason that only theology that is sensitive to and in dialogue with the *lived experiences* of all people must hold a central place in the work of Practical Theology and pastoral counselling.

I chose a contextual approach to doing practical theology because of the paradigm shift in such an approach, compared with the angles of approach of traditional theologies. Hooks (quoted in Coll, Surrey and Weingarten 1998:8) writes that when paradigms shift, ‘we learn to talk, to listen and to hear in a new way’. Whilst theology was previously conducted from ‘above’, contextual theology is ‘from below’ (Bosch 1991:423), focusing on those who are ‘socially rejected by modern society and those who are not fit to compete in such society’ (Rossouw 1993:902). This form of practical theology, with its ‘from below’ communication style, suggests that religious information can no longer be passed down to people, but that communication should involve the experiences and expectations of the people themselves (Rossouw 1993:900).

The new epistemology underscores the priority of praxis. By implication, theology can only be done credibly if it is done *with* those who suffer; the emphasis is on *doing* theology (Bosch 1991:424). Theological conversations should entail a ‘talking with’; an ‘in there together’ process in which the issues at hand are co-explored towards resolution and hope. Helping people to attain a voice requires a theology that actively resists all the cultural forces that work against people’s finding their ‘local knowledge’ to bring about change for themselves and the contexts in which they live (Neuger 2001:230). Examples can be found in the many cultural pressures in the lives of women that shape a false narrative about what it means to be female. Because these personal narratives do not give access to the acknowledgement or

expression of the experiences of women, this has led to many personal and relational problems in their lives.

The theological resource for contextual theology is the nature of justice, which can be seen as the core principle that runs through the Scriptures. Crossan (quoted in Neuger 2001:103) suggests that 'justice is not just a quality that God manifests or chooses; the essence of God is justice – justice is who and what God is'. Particularly in the prophetic writings, this emphasis is all-important. Not only did the prophets often criticise the dominant, oppressive culture of their time, they also witnessed to the wrong that was being done to those who were abused and marginalised. One of the mandates of the prophetic tradition is to ask of those who offer pastoral care to bear witness. This not only means having empathy for the stories of the abused and oppressed, but doing whatever we can to make their voices heard. This witness-bearing tradition of the prophets directly contradicts the response of silence and rebuttal to victims of abuse by the church and society (Neuger 2001:104).

Pastoral work is a work of passion, related to my commitment to acknowledging and confessing Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ: redeemer, liberator and Lord (Cochrane, De Gruchy & Petersen 1991:15). The stand I take helps me to 'do' theology with women who suffer abuse, in so far as Jesus calls women to a new way of being in the world. Far from supporting the oppression of women, Jesus' vision calls for the elimination of structures of domination and submission. He brings the good news that those who have no voice are valued and are called to full personhood. 'He expands their horizon and calls them forward' (Fischer 1988:83).

1.11.2 Poststructural Feminist Theology

I understand Feminism to be a world view that provides me with a lens through which to view the world and all its 'internal' relationships. As an interpretative paradigm, it guides my focus to issues concerning the lives of women in patriarchal society, to how certain kinds of negotiated meanings operate to marginalise women. Its emphasis on praxis includes the voices of women and, as an alternative world view, it has as its focus the divisions inherent in patriarchy, to be replaced with models of wholeness for both men and women (Fischer 1988:2). Involvement in feminist postmodern work calls for the identification of socio-cultural messages or discourses that serve to fetter the lives of people (Weingarten 1995:2).

Ackermann (1996a:43) stresses that feminist theological praxis insists that our collective human endeavour is central to the healing and liberating praxis necessary to restore God's

creation. The feminist perspective believes that such global convalescence is dependent upon changing relationships – with God, with ourselves, with others – through a commitment to justice and freedom: at the same time remodelling structures in society which perpetuate economic, political and social alienation (Ackermann 1996a:47).

1.12 PLANNING THE RESEARCH STUDY

1.12.1 Inviting participants

I contacted two women who had suffered domestic, emotional and verbal abuse and whom I had assisted therapeutically in the past. In my interaction with people I regard it as ethically important that I remain alert to the fact that spirituality may be a private matter for them. Because of previous interactions between myself and both the participants, I knew that spirituality played an important part in their lives. It was for this reason that I invited them to participate in the study and they agreed.

1.12.2 The initial meeting

I set up a preliminary meeting with the prospective participants in order to explain in greater detail the purpose and objectives of the project. I also assured them that their autonomy would be respected at all times. Discussions at this preliminary meeting were summarised in the form of a personal letter to each participant (Appendix A). In addition, I compiled a General Information sheet for invited participation (Appendix B). Furthermore, a Consent Form for participation (Appendix C) and a Consent Form for the release of information (Appendix D) were given to and voluntarily signed by the participants.

1.13 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

1.13.1 Inviting and listening to stories of suffering and stories of hope

At the start of our discussions, I sought to understand from the participants what participation in the project would mean for them (Zuber-Skerrit 1996:17).

As with many victims of abuse, they had not had an opportunity to share their stories in a sympathetic and caring environment, and were uncertain regarding their feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Both participants hoped that in the telling of their stories there would be healing and growth. For both of them the 'voice' of spirituality was an important issue, so that

the study engaged us in a collaborative process of 'deconstructing problematic stories, identifying preferred directions and developing alternative stories that supported these preferred directions' (Freedman & Combs 1996:118). The focus of the research was to develop an account of reality, as seen from the margins, a lens through which their perspectives would not be viewed as subjugated or disruptive, but as primary and constitutive of a different reality.

1.13.2 Finding the self in the recollection of stories

In structuring the research process of story telling, I was strongly guided by the work of Neumann (1992:176-201) and his use of travel as a metaphor for the stories people tell about their lives, the different roads travelled on the journey of life.

The research process took place approximately one year after the participants had received therapeutic assistance, and by the time the project started they had both made considerable progress in freeing themselves from the damaging consequences of abusive relationships. The telling of their stories provided the domain for achieving a sense of self before others; through retrospection the story was given structure and meaning which became a form of self-knowledge.

The research process captured both old and new stories. However, in searching for the new, the participants often became occupied with the problem of escaping the hurt of the old story. In working with the participants who had suffered abuse, I considered it very important they be heard in the fullness of their experiences, so that when the new story lines were created, they were able to live both the old and new so as to fully understand the implications of both stories in the moment of recalling.

Making use of narrative as a guiding metaphor, the telling and reflecting upon the story was an important means toward reconstructing a life, a means sufficient for healing to occur (White 1995:23). Stories reflect human feelings and lived experience, and healing necessarily involves the telling, hearing and unravelling of stories. The understanding is that the self can be reconstructed by a story through the use of language that facilitates self-knowledge and growth. People are empowered by the role of the narrative; through the performance of narratives we also witness the performance of self and individuals arrive at a more subtle understanding of their life situations (Mischler 1986:119). It is in the context of story-telling that a stage for performances is provided and, although accomplishments are not recognised by a crowd of people, through the story, a sense of self is revealed that may

be hidden in much of day-to-day living. The stories of Diana and Louise shared experiences of personal sacrifice and perseverance in the face of hardships. As the stories unfolded they revealed a sense of self, having endured and accomplished much, a testimony to what Neumann (1992:184) calls the ability of the self to struggle through difficult times.

1.13.3 Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the process of dismembering the taken-for-granted assumptions or knowledges people have about themselves and their world. It involves a process in which discourses are unmasked and people's position within them are revealed (White 1991:26).

The research set about deconstructing the problem stories by two means (White 1991:29):

- through the telling of their stories, highlighting 'unique outcomes' and focusing on their spiritual strength which served as a counter plot to the stories of abuse; and
- the repositioning of the participants as agents rather than as the objects of discourse within which their subjective feelings became inscribed.

1.13.4 Externalising conversation and the anchoring of chosen stories

The stories provided the participants with situations and contexts where they were confronted with alternative possibilities for belonging to the world. Part of the promise of telling their stories was to live and know the self in other ways. In their journey they recalled moments of transformation they had discovered, something of themselves that revealed alternative forms of knowledge. Many of these accounts suggested how a new sense of self emerged through the circumstances and events they had experienced. The telling of the story involved 'radical listening' for accounts of 'lived experience, which constituted alternative stories about how life might be, other versions of life as lived', something always there even in the most marginalised and disempowered lives (White 1995:19). Through the construction of alternative stories into a counter plot, a new and different atmosphere was created in order to 'disempower' the influence of an abuse-dominated view of the self.

A counter plot is a 'story that contributes to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations and conclusion' (Neuger 2001:34). The aim of the counter plot is to assist in gaining a sense of agency, in the realisation that we have choices and power to decide about our lives, something which brings confidence in a future story that has value. It did not mean that their stories of abuse did not receive sympathetic hearing; but it was in the context of the

story that experiences which did not fit the problem-saturated story of abuse were filtered out as threads of hope, resourcefulness and capability – previously excluded from their descriptions of self.

Furthermore, the research process attempted to highlight new and rediscovered understandings of their spirituality, as well as previously unnoticed spiritual strengths that were valued and woven into the new story. Substance and richness were given to these meanings and choices in a way that facilitated the creation of the alternative and preferred story (White 1995:23).

1.13.5 Working with familiar discourses

Within the framework of a postmodern epistemology, the 'selves' of the participants were regarded as inextricably embedded in and defined by the socio-political and religious contexts within which they lived. Through the process of social interaction their 'selves' were discursively constituted through discourse.

During the research process we looked at 'how' the subject was constructed and what discourses were operating to create the participants' view of self. We discussed the ways in which discourses contribute to the shaping of grand narratives such as Christianity and patriarchy and their effect on our lives due to our positioning within discourse. Furthermore, as discursive influences are structured through complex and ritualised power plays, we have had to examine the ways in which knowledge and power were at play within discourse to determine its status, resulting in the participants' acting in ways that deprived them of agency and autonomy.

1.14 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is 'ideologically driven and that there is no value-free or bias-free design' (Janesick 1994:212). As a qualitative researcher, I deal with persons face-to-face, something which involves an awareness of ethical concerns not just during the study but also for the possibilities of recurring ethical dilemmas after the completion of the project.

Working with the lives of individual people, for me the research process was framed by the realisation that 'the quest for objectivity should not supersede the human side of those studied' (Fontana & Frey 1994:373) and I took as much care as I could not to harm the

participants. I attempted to exercise common sense and responsibility ‘to the participants first, next to the study and then to myself last’ (Fontana & Frey 1994:373).

1.14.1 Informed subjects

Ethical considerations revolved around informed consent (participants’ being honestly informed about the research), their right to privacy (enjoying protection of their identities) and protection from harm (physical and emotional) (Fontana & Frey 1994:372). I assisted the research participants to be ‘informed’ subjects, something which I believe to be critical to the establishment of trust as well as to information shared and to the outcome of the project as a whole. These thoughts framed the research process and involved the aspects discussed below.

1.14.2 Learning about the ‘other’

The postmodern stance of a ‘not knowing’ position guided my ethical imperative to act in ways that would increase the number of choices so that space was provided for the exploration of new patterns of thought and action. Questions asked were considered in terms of their practical and social impact, as well as their communication function, conveyed by the language used. Facilitating the process of empowerment focused on the drawing out of the resources that the participants brought to their experiences, rather than imposing any solutions.

The research process involved a particular kind of conversation, one that emphasised a ‘style’ of interaction which is considered to be more ‘collaborative’ and less imposing (White 1995:63). As the research involved *doing* theology with those who suffer, it meant that the collaborative style was introduced by thought and action, insisting that all knowledge is not vested within me as a researcher, but that the participants had valuable contributions to make. This implies that expertise must be enriched and informed by those who occupy the margins (Rossouw 1993:902).

Given the above, the research process sought a ‘moving away’ from a position that constructs boundaries between myself and the research participants, making possible collaborative and dialectical interaction – what Heshusius (1994:206) calls a ‘participatory mode of consciousness’, and which Denzin and Lincoln (1994b:582) describe as a ‘spiritual core’, ‘a way of connecting to meaning, purpose, wholeness and holiness’. It follows that the

research process had to acknowledge that meaningful dialogue is not fully possible and that the acquisition of knowledge is strongly impeded by categories of 'me' and 'them'.

1.14.3 Rational ego-based knowledge versus reflexive knowledge

A postmodern stance holds that complex forms of knowledge may be reduced or simplified and that other ways of knowing may be blocked if an understanding of the reality of the participant is concluded empirically or by means of pre-conceived knowledges (Damianakis 2001:24).

Knowledge acquisition in terms of spirituality alerts one to the important distinction which exists between rational ego-based knowledge (often externally driven toward a particular goal or truth) and more reflexive knowledge. Reality is not fixed or given. Through a collaborative research process we partake in its creation and must ensure that 'reality' does not constrict. This becomes important when I realise that by inviting participants to speak about God or their spiritual experiences, my 'stories of certainty' can intrude into and constrain the possibilities for rich conversations with God in the research process (Griffith 1995:127). 'It is to keep the options open and the alternatives fresh by granting the participants freedom and being considerate of them' (Ravn 1991:97). In the research process, it meant a constant awareness of and reflection on my own values and beliefs and the effect these could have on the participants. Hence, the research process becomes a setting where researcher and participant 'are always opening and closing the doors to new places together' (Griffith 1995:124).

1.15 REPORTING THE RESEARCH

1.15.1 Chapters Two and Three: introducing the research stories

These chapters present narrative accounts that reveal the ways two women victims of abuse experienced the issue investigated (spirituality in abusive circumstances) and the contexts within which the abuse occurred. The aim of the report is to present richly detailed, thickly described accounts that enable readers to understand with empathy the lived reality of the research participants. The accounts have been constructed from information gathered and interpreted during the study with all events, activities and contexts described from the perspective of the participants (Stringer 1999:178).

1.15.2 Chapters Four and Five: a summary of the participants' personal narratives and deconstructing the relevant literature

These chapters use the narratives of the research participants to construct a general account that summarises a discussion of the research topic. Features and themes that are common to the stories are identified and organised into a framework that explains how the research participants experienced the issue investigated. The chapters also provide a literature survey of the issue investigated to enable readers to understand the ways in which academic writers have interpreted such issues.

1.15.3 Chapter Six: on writing other people's lives – self-analysing reflections

In this chapter the participants and I reflect on the journey and what the process meant for us. The participants provided information regarding their participation in the project and gave an account of changes in their personal lives as a result. I incorporate my own personal journal with 'news' to other qualitative researchers as to how the research journey has moved and changed my life, documenting my fears and anxiety about the project, as well as stories of hope and fulfilment.

I restate the curiosity and aims of the project and reflect on the research process according to these guidelines. The chapter provides new knowledges and discoveries around the topic investigated with regard to qualitative research, practical theology and pastoral counselling.

CHAPTER TWO

SUBJECTIVE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND THEIR CONNECTION TO POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS: DIANA TELLS HER STORY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout this chapter Diana's own voice appears. Hence the 'I' in this chapter is Diana and not the researcher as in Chapter One. Questions were asked to promote thicker descriptions around certain events and experiences (see 1.14.2) and are indicated in the text as coming from the researcher. Furthermore, the 'lived reality' of Diana was given form and structure through interpretative frameworks, arranging the material according to themes which emphasise social discourses and a particular cultural and social world in which the story unfolds (see 1.13.5). Through her story an understanding of discourses is provided (see 1.8.1.2), whilst the importance of the interplay between language and discourse in the production of knowledge (see 1.8.3 and 4.1) is highlighted. The research focus was on new and rediscovered understanding of Diana's spirituality in the form of 'experience near' language and rich descriptions, providing a counter plot to the stories of abuse (see 1.13.4; 1.10.4, as well as the discussion in 4.4).

Background information and ideas as to the final crafting of the research text are explained in the Prologue under the subheading, 'The research text, its authority and style'. Initial steps taken during the development of the research process up to the final writing of the research text are explained in the Prologue under the subheadings 'From field to field text to research text'. Furthermore, the interpretative frameworks and themes used to build Diana's narrative into its final form stem from concerns raised in 1.4.3 to 1.4.5 and 1.5, as well as the discussion in 4.1.1 to 4.3.

This is Diana's story.

2.2 THE REALITIES OF PATRIARCHY IN DIANA'S LIFE

I was one of three children and I remember my childhood as a period of extreme hardship and much sadness. I grew up without a father, because he left when I was three years old.

My mother was never employed; money was very scarce and she worked extremely hard to care for us and her home. For as long as I can remember, there was a longing for love, to be noticed and appreciated as a person, and this was so much part of my growing years.

My mother was wrapped up in her own intense emotional and financial struggle. We were often verbally abused and mistreated. She was not a person who could show affection; we seldom received a hug or a kiss on the cheek. From a very young age I had to cook and clean the house; we often had to prepare breakfast for her in bed before we left for school because she had been busy with housework until late at night. She was not easy to please and the breakfast often landed in the bin. Looking back today, I realise the hopelessness of her situation, the way my father had rejected both her and us, something which would shape my world and my self-image in profound ways. My adolescent years were pre-occupied with constantly having to make choices which denied myself in favour of others, living for and through others. My mother would always remind me: 'You must keep quiet and always consider yourself last.'

Growing up with very little in life and having known financial hardship and adversity as partners on my journey into adulthood, I thought the future could only improve when I left my mother's house to be married. Not having known a father-figure all my life, I also knew little about married life. I had this vision of marriage as a life spent happily ever after.

Our life together began on Robben Island where my husband was employed as a chef in the prison service. During the winter months especially, strong north-westerly gales caused heavy seas, so that boat trips to the mainland were irregular; resulting in few visits to my family and friends. On the other hand, influential people and high ranking government officials often visited the island. My husband, eager to create an appreciation for his expertise, did not spend much time with me and during the visits of such V.I.P.s seemed to notice me even less than usual. To make matters worse, I realised that I had married a multi-talented man; there was no way I could compete with him! In addition to his cooking and baking skills, he could paint, sing and play musical instruments. I witnessed the richness of these talents with an uneasy stirring in my heart; because whenever I tried to do anything, he would want to take it away from me; he even finished knitting a jersey I was making for myself!

My husband was subsequently transferred to the prison service at Wolseley and so we left the island. The position proved less challenging for him. Perhaps for this reason he was often irritated and short-tempered, despite the fact that I was now pregnant with our first child. Our

daughter was born and he assisted me during the first two weeks, after which he withdrew completely. I was inexperienced and still remember this as a difficult and exhausting time with many sleepless nights. The baby was very ill due to a partial blockage in her colon, causing her to cry day and night. He seemed to be little bothered, as if I was quite capable of handling everything on my own! Only much later would I understand his sentiments regarding the running of our home and rearing of our children. Where was I in all this? I tried hard to do what I believed were a wife's responsibilities: seeing to the needs of our home and the baby as well as being married to his plans. He had by now made up his mind about leaving the prison service despite all the benefits the position offered. I felt unready for major changes – for me it was important that we both had time to get used to the baby.

It was during this time that I noticed he began to sit with his Bible, reading from Scripture whenever he had free time. Although I felt uneasy with this, at the same time I was powerless to fault his actions. Great was my surprise when he announced one day: 'God has told me to start a cooking school.' Curious as to where all this should happen, I was informed that our kitchen was the place he had in mind. As I could not drum up any enthusiasm for our home to be turned into a cooking school, this idea was abandoned; he decided to open a restaurant instead.

The restaurant brought new problems of its own. My husband was kept busy until the early hours of the morning. The little cash we had available soon dried up, as more and more money was poured into the business to keep it going. Had it been paying its way, things might have been different, but we seemed to be going downhill! Concerned that the long hours at the restaurant deprived him of time he could spend with me and especially with our baby, I tried to make up for this. I often bathed the baby and walked her in her pram to the restaurant to visit her father. He was invariably too busy entertaining other people and made us turn back as if we were unimportant. Communication between us was sadly lacking, so that by the time the restaurant business failed, I also found out that we were in debt to the bank for a large sum of money. I was angry at my husband for getting us into such a mess in the first place, but what was I to do? Once he sets his mind on something you just have to try and see it through.

The fact that my husband did not earn much, coupled with the debt we had to repay, caused us great financial hardship. Money for anything extra – now that was a miracle and a rare one too! I got used to calculating the grocery bill in my head and cutting the monthly budget in every possible way so there would be food in the house. My children and I only knew second-hand clothes and shoes – and they had to be good for church and every other day.

Having to cope with hardship is one thing; but having to cope when everything is your responsibility, now that is another matter! I married a man who seldom shared in the running of our home and never once got up at night to care for the children when they were ill. I was not allowed to complain because he was the one who had to work all day long; he was, after all, the provider!

Months went by and our circumstances did not improve. In fact they became chaotic. Something had to be done, our situation was desperate. Although he was a trained chef, I was the one baking pies and cakes, catering for small functions, all from my home. At the end of the day there were all the dishes to be cleaned, with two small children constantly underfoot. I was exhausted and felt myself defeated in the ongoing battle against financial stress. Thoughts of despair often filled my mind, causing much emptiness; inside me I had stopped living. I was convinced that nobody cared for me or noticed me, I was just there to do the dirty work, absolutely trapped in my responsibilities of being a wife and mother. This was the only thing I could do really well!

Because of my own struggle as a woman I could begin to sympathise with my mother and was better able to understand the conflict of my growing years. At least she was there to talk to and she was on my side. Although she had very little to give, she would often keep a plate of food for me or put ten Rand in my hand. She often expressed her anger towards my husband because of his treatment of me.

Looking back now, I often wonder how I coped; yet I believe through it all I became stronger. My husband sat at home without really looking for work for nearly nine months. During this time my mother died suddenly; I was filled with much sadness. Being so wrapped up in my own problems I regret not having spent more time with her.

At the beginning of 2002, after months of waiting and praying, my husband told me of his decision to move to a place for homeless people called the Ark. He believed that God had directed him. He was to supervise the kitchen and was very enthusiastic. Considering that we had suffered immensely during the time he was unemployed, the Ark sounded wonderful, bringing a sense of expectation and hope. It was a new chapter, a new life and – if the sad truth be owned – I was tired of struggling. We would now have a roof over our heads; we would not have the constant worry about food; the children could go to school on the premises; everything was to be provided for us. What was I to do other than believe we were moving forward, that we were leaving the worst behind? He told me that the accommodation offered to us was very limited and that only our essential possessions were to go with us. As

I carefully sorted through our belongings, I was overcome emotionally. I did not have much in the way of pretty things, but I had cups and saucers with painted springtime patterns left to me by my mother and only to be used on special occasions. I was told that I would have no use for them at the Ark, whereupon I had to give them away.

So many times before in my life I would step out of difficult circumstances, thinking I was moving ahead, always hoping that things would improve; only to be disappointed once more. The decision to move to the Ark was fatally flawed, again the wrong decision, wrong by a mile!

The Ark accommodates some fifteen hundred homeless people; many have lived there for years. There were many little children who have never known any life outside its walls. The school on the premises caters for approximately four hundred children. We were introduced to every kind of humanity and an environment different to any we had ever known. At times we did not feel safe. The children were often ill. They did not like the school and were unhappy all the time.

Possibly I was expecting too much, but there was little one could hope for. Food was donated daily and delivered in big black plastic bags. Often the food arrived all mixed up, a hodge-podge of old pies, stale bread, vegetables and pieces of Kentucky chicken thrown in. The day-to-day menu depended on what came in that day. The quality of food was poor and the variety extremely limited. Meat was a rare luxury. At meal times we all shuffled along in long queues, waiting for our food to be plonked into our plates. The place was very much what I imagine a prison to be like.

With no means of presenting the food fancily and no kitchen to supervise, my husband needed no invitation to assist the Ark personnel with their counselling duties. This certainly put a whole new outlook on things as he had always indicated that he wished to be full time in the Lord's service. He noticed the children and myself less and less as he forged ahead with his counselling duties.

My husband was a changed man – often I felt I did not know him any longer. He was aware of just how unhappy the children and I had become, yet he was also determined not to leave the Ark. He saw the reason for our being at the Ark as a Godly calling. Again, I was the one who did not understand such spiritual matters, the one responsible for the unhappiness we experienced because I did not agree with him.

2.3 LANGUAGE, RELATIONSHIP AND SPIRITUALITY

Even today, I am still finding it difficult in certain circumstances to truly express what I feel or what I want. So often in my life I have felt unheard and unheeded.

My growing years were marked by a struggle for acceptance. Because it was hard to please my mother and I never received any recognition for what I was or did, I also believed there was little I could do to earn God's love. I believed with my mind in a loving God, but I experienced Him as distant and uninvolved. I had faith in God's love and forgiveness, but was crippled by fear of God's being disappointed with me. I still remember times during stormy weather when my mother would say: 'Listen to the thunder! Because you were naughty, God is unhappy with you.' As distant as my father was to me, God was even more distant. I was so confused, because at times He was a punitive and angry God, yet I can remember the comfort from reading my Bible at night. My mother would send us to bed and after she ordered us to turn the lights out I would read by torchlight under the blanket. My favourite passage was Psalm 23, The Lord is my Shepherd, I think because again it reflected my intense longing for acceptance; He was *my* Shepherd during very bleak days.

Sadly, my life was marked by a continuous struggle to get close to God or for me to feel that God loved me. This was aggravated by the fact that I married a man who specialised in maintaining the upper hand and, what is more, I believed that God was on his side. With little to occupy me, I became involved in the running of Sunday School classes. I remember these days as a time when I struggled to grow spiritually because I could not 'hang onto the Lord', despite many verses of Scripture received from friends. My husband also told me that my spiritual life lacked depth. I believed him because whenever we talked spiritual matters I was always in his shadow; he always seemed to be two or more steps ahead of me. I often turned to the Bible for comfort, only to find myself overwhelmed by the feeling that I was in competition with my husband regarding my spiritual life.

I remained spiritually barren, despite the fact that my husband continued to strongly influence and inform my ways regarding my religious and spiritual life. As part of his morning routine, he would wake me up at 6.00 o'clock for Bible study. I often complained, because I had been up all night for the children, during which time he slept soundly. Yet he insisted that 'one has to give the best time of the day to the Lord'. I was often there yawning and full of sleep, convinced that it was the worst time of day for me. I desperately sought the Lord, often at

night when the children would be restless and my sleep would not return. Looking back now I know He was there with me all the time.

Joan: Diana, how did you know that God was with you?

The children never once went to bed hungry. There was often no money and no food. I am sad even now thinking that at times I was overcome with fear and doubt. I did not trust God enough. Yet, He was so faithful. Often when I did not know which way to turn, friends and family would arrive with food parcels and sweets for the children.

I had very few friends and after my mother died I felt extremely lonely. Nothing made sense anymore. I found it difficult to decide whether to stay with my husband or not. He told me that our marriage was in a mess because I was not praying with him. The manipulation was so intense I believed him; if food was scarce and we had no money, it was because of my inadequate spiritual life.

2.4 RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM IN DIANA'S LIFE

As the years passed, with our situation becoming more chaotic, and my husband and I struggling with our relationship, he spent considerably more time reading his Bible and became increasingly rigid in his thinking. When we visited our friends or family he carried his Bible under his arm with him. I complained: 'But we are not going to church!' He argued that people might ask him questions around Scripture. The real 'problem' was that he could no longer talk about anything else and people became increasingly uncomfortable in his presence. He had changed, I could see that. He was striving all the time to be more religious, more devout; and it was difficult to find fault with that. The more he studied the Bible, the more distant we seemed to become. With it all came a finely developed sense of sin and he became extremely critical and demanding of me.

We now had two children and I begged him to buy a television set which I felt would keep the children occupied at certain times of the day so I could manage all the chores around the house. Now this was out of the question! He was suspicious of all television programmes, especially soap operas, and was concerned as to what the children and I could be exposed to. Television would lure me into corrupt ways, as if I could not think for myself! He was continually telling me what God wanted from us; as if God gave men alone insight into such matters. At times I felt disappointed with God. It was hard to know how much more He wanted from me.

I was exhausted and felt myself facing defeat in the ongoing battle against financial stress. One day I discussed with my husband the possibility of looking for part-time employment for myself. Apart from the extra money we needed, I so desperately longed to get out of the house. I wanted to improve myself, to learn new skills and to experience a world different to the confining walls of our home. You can guess what the outcome of this conversation was. He would rather see us facing one crisis after another than listen to anyone but himself. I was now face to face with someone who 'knew his Bible'. He gave me the impression that only I was troubled by such difficulties as interpreting God's word. He told me what the Bible said. The man as the head of the family alone was responsible for providing for his wife and children. He considered my wanting to find employment outside our home an idea straight from the devil. I had to be respectful and submissive to my own husband, but what was this idea of wanting to allow other men to order me around? Well, that was that! Outside the confines of Scripture, he was at a loss for words to discuss the issue, and so the conversation was closed.

Before my mother passed away, on several occasions I had to rely on her to take care of my children and household chores when I became very ill. My husband did not have a good relationship with my mother, always considering her to be interfering in his household. He was never grateful when my mother helped us out. He once wrote her a letter to prove his point. The letter depicted his interpretation of biblical hierarchy, a pyramid with God, man, woman and children, in that order. He made it quite clear that anyone trying to interfere in his household was no longer welcome in his home.

Whilst working in the bakery section of a large supermarket, [the last permanent position he held], my husband complained that conditions at work were not satisfactory and he resigned. What is more, after a few months at home it was clear that he was not eager to find other employment. More and more time was spent reading his Bible and in prayer. He told everyone that he was waiting on the Lord, that He would provide for our needs and that he was not going to look for work until he was sure that the Lord was directing him.

We had hugely differing ideas about the concept of work. I felt that we should work for what we needed, whilst also trusting the Lord to provide for us. I urged him to find employment as our situation made me feel very insecure. He, on the other hand, believed we should trust the Lord wholly for money and food. If you think we had travelled a rough road before, we now often had very little to eat in the house. When the children had nothing to put on their bread,

he told them to pray. He saw my faltering faith as the stumbling block, as the reason for our financial struggle.

I find it hard to say this – but the more devout my husband became, the more difficult I found it to understand him. Whilst living at the Ark and without any warning, he suddenly decided to accept the Jewish faith and began celebrating the Sabbath on Saturday. He was very serious regarding his new faith mission, sitting with his Bible from Friday evening until late Saturday. Somebody gave him a ram's horn which he often blew for 'the walls of Jericho to fall'. Everything was too much for me to handle. On *his* Sabbath we were to stay at home; I was not allowed to cook and we also did not do much with the children. The whole idea brought much unpleasantness because I insisted that the Sabbath for myself and the children remain on Sunday.

2.5 THE DUAL FACE OF RELIGION AND ITS EFFECT ON DIANA'S SPIRITUALITY

My mother never went to church. What I knew about God was acquired by going to Sunday School and following the religious codes which I had learned. It did not help me to develop a relationship with God, probably because my own feelings and fears were never 'spoken' to. I was aware of my own shortcomings and in the light of this I considered an intimate relationship with God impossible.

Much of this had to do with the religion of my childhood years and perhaps the fact that I did not have a trusting father-figure when I was growing up. I knew of God but had no meaningful relationship with Him; it makes a big difference. It was standard church practice that you were confirmed at a certain age and that confirmation coincided with having to 'give your heart to the Lord'. For me this was only a religious ritual, memorising certain Scriptural verses whilst not really understanding the true significance of the ceremony. For others with me, it was only important in so far as it enabled them to participate in the communion service. All this was necessary in order to become a member of the church; I guess a lot is about tradition.

Sadly, my life was marked by a continual struggle to build a relationship with God. Whenever I fell back, feelings of worthlessness caused me to believe that I would never 'make' it, that I would never get close to God. It was the whole idea of wanting to be perfect before God; nobody ever told me that it was impossible. I became an irregular church-goer. There was so much I did not understand and I wondered if the problem was with me or with the minister. These feelings of uncertainty were further heightened by my husband, who was constantly

critical of me. Because he ran me down the way he did, mixed feelings about myself and my spiritual life convinced me that I was not good enough in God's eyes.

In our church it was accepted that women have to be submissive, the religious argument advocating how women should be and live being justified by Scripture. My husband believed that he was responsible for directing all aspects of my life, that the hierarchical structure of our relationship was divinely ordered. It was his idea of a Godly family, giving him complete power and authority over all family matters. I had no say regarding my own life – my role was confined to doing the dirty work.

Like so many women, I also turned to the church for assistance. I considered it unfortunate that some of the women, including the minister's wife, suggested that I should trust my husband and stand by him in every decision he made. They regarded him as a good Christian, a God-fearing man. [This was before his conversion to Judaism]. They told me that divorce was wrong, that it was not from God. Of course they did not have to live with my husband. Nor did they know him as I did. I felt abandoned, but also guilty – the problem had to be with me. I often wondered how much more was expected of me. One thing was clear to me: I had no weapons for this fight. The playing field of my marriage was not level; there are countless rules to the game and none of these were on my side.

2.6 DIANA'S JOURNEY INTO A NEW SPIRITUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

About five years ago we moved to a new church. [This is before the move to the Ark and before her husband's conversion to Judaism.] The pastor identified with the difficulty I had believing in my own sacredness, in God's love and mercy and my inability to understand and express my own experience of God. For the first time, I felt that somebody was prepared to hear what I had to say; the conversation made a lot of sense simply because it was not one-sided. He did not make me feel as if he had all the knowledge, that I knew nothing. He made me feel that it was important for him to try and understand my emotions regarding my spirituality; he was really interested in me and in what I had to say. He listened to my questions and insights, whilst at the same time offering prayer, affirmation and suggestions to assist me further in my spiritual growth.

Shortly after this conversation I attended a gospel concert. Because my husband always made me feel that only he knew what I should do to grow spiritually, I was determined not to make a commitment to the Lord; I did not want to please my husband. I had heard so many times before that Jesus had died for *me*, although I never really understood why or how He

could die for someone as confused and saddled with problems as myself. That night at the concert I realised it was because Jesus loved me, despite all my shortcomings. My husband was no longer central to the picture, it was now between God and me. I felt the warmth of His presence. That God totally and unconditionally accepted me was all that was important. I felt peace within myself. The gospel concert and the conversations with the minister helped me to articulate my own experiences; they enabled me to grow as I was encouraged to seek and stand up for what I believed. I am sure now that there is a purpose for everything and that God is in control.

Joan: After your discussions with the pastor, followed by the gospel concert – something happened. You experienced it as a growth within you that encouraged you to seek and stand up for what you believed. How did this shift from previously held assumptions about your own worth take place?

What was special about the pastoral conversation was that he was interested in *me* as a person, in *my* spiritual development and growth. The night at the concert I was touched again, touched by the fact that God totally accepts *me* for who I am; unconditionally. With it came the realisation that I was responsible for my own spiritual growth. My husband did not need to be the spokesperson between myself and God. God was inviting me to find security in Him. I realised that I no longer had to be the invisible one behind my husband, that it was only fair that I too had a say in matters affecting my life.

2.7 ANOTHER STORY? THE EMERGENCE OF VOICE, NEW IMAGES AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GOD METAPHORS

[Having left the Ark, Diana and her children are now living with her mother-in-law and her husband]. I have now been apart from my husband for four months and have had much-needed time to think about my life. In addition, I have my in-laws' believing in me and supporting me. This contributes to much of the excitement and motivation I now have to make a success of my life. They are fully aware of the hard times I have faced so often in my life. My mother-in-law, now remarried, experienced many of the same problems in her marriage. Our relationship is one of mutual empathy and emotional connectedness, in which spirituality is embraced in our reading of the daily devotion together. It is very special for me to know that she cares so much for me.

What has been important during the past months is the insight I have gained about myself – for the first time in years I feel in charge of my own life. I have had to think about who I really

am. I can now hear my own voice, get in touch with my own thoughts and feelings. I listen to the inside of me and I know what to do. I have discovered a part of myself that I did not know existed until now. I discovered 'you are not as weak or useless as you thought; you need to stand up for yourself and do things on your own'. It still feels strange, the whole idea of being on my own, doing things the way I want to.

I never realised that no matter how much my husband broke me down, God saw me in a different light. Away from my husband, I am more open and responsive to God's presence in my life. I need Him and I am dependent on Him now to help me through this. Staying focused on what I want for myself and the children is not easy. I have to remind myself that I can do it, that I will do it! However, I also have fears that I may not be able to make it on my own. This is where my trust in God comes in.

I have this feeling inside me I am not able to describe in words. In the past I never knew where I was heading. I had nothing to live for, every day brought more hardship and I was expected to take more and more. I am much stronger now. I have the course to finish [Diana has enrolled for a course in office management and computing] and I am determined to work hard in order to show everyone what I am able to achieve. God is busy with me; it is as if He says: 'Come, you are not what everyone says you are, I will show you who you really are.'

It is all part of the process of finding a new spiritual path, moving away from and healing all the hurt. Religious practices and language I was exposed to over the past years did not inspire hope or provide any connection for me, rather guilt and isolation. Now that I am on my own I will decide about my Christian ways of being. I think of the times when my husband and I shared in family worship at home. It was always at a time that suited him, involving hours of Bible reading for instance. For me, a long conversation with the Lord in prayer meant much more in terms of what I felt and experienced. Because my husband was prescriptive as to how we should worship, I believe the intimacy between God and myself suffered.

When my mother was still alive, she often suggested that I should leave my husband. I have asked God so many times why I had to suffer so much. Why was everything happening to me? I wanted to know from Him when my circumstances would improve. Perhaps I was not ready to leave my husband then. God also has a plan and purpose for my life. I believe I had to travel this road – I believe I even had to go to the Ark to arrive where I am now, so I could really find a way to hope and trust in God. I do not think I would have coped otherwise. I believe God is with me now: He supports me and strengthens me. I also believe all the

positive thoughts I now have come from God; I do sometimes still feel downhearted but the positive side is now more prominent. I am most surprised with myself – I did not think that things would fall into place for me so quickly. I find it difficult to describe; the peace and freedom; I always felt so closed in, never able to do anything for myself.

Joan: How do you know that God is supporting you?

In small things, sometimes difficult to articulate, because God's response is often in expressions that are non-verbal. I often find a verse in the Bible during times of sadness and loneliness, as if God is speaking to me personally.

When I left my husband, the children had to move schools. I still remember being in the principal's office to pay their school fees – I held the last R200 I had in my hand. I cannot tell you how grateful I was when she said that she knew of my circumstances and asked me to pay only half the amount due.

On another occasion my father-in-law had to fetch my furniture from the Ark. He had a trailer but his bakkie needed a tow-bar and also required mechanical repairs before we could make the trip. The mechanic at the workshop fitted the tow-bar and new parts for the vehicle and did not charge anything. I hardly knew this person; he did not have to do it. I saw God in the actions of these people.

Even though I know today that I 'pushed' God away from me on many occasions, there were times during which I just knew God looked after me. My mother often treated me badly, but she was often the only one there for me – she was always there when I needed her. We often talked. When she died, suddenly I realised just how lonely I had become. I do not have any meaningful relationship with my brother and sister. Whenever my family visited, my husband took out his Bible; so the visiting stopped. I know I would not have been able to cope with my mother's death if it was not for God. I remember often just talking to Him, more than anything I was looking for someone to share my loneliness. God was always there.

Joan: Standing outside the situation now, can you think of other times God looked after you?

The ongoing battle with financial stress totally wore me down. Many people say it is in the face of hardship that you really get to know God. I often blamed God because I have dreams for my children, I did not want them to live with poverty as I did. As a family we ate bread most of the time. I would argue with my husband because there was no money for basic

essentials. He would take his Bible and pray. On one occasion the landlord notified us to leave the rent until such time as my husband found employment.

Joan: How do these experiences sustain and strengthen you now?

I have come to realise that God is faithful. That He knows all of me as a person and only He knows everything concerning my life.

Joan: Away from your husband, you have not just 'discovered' yourself, but you have also discovered God in a way?

For most of my life I struggled to get close to God. It is different now. I experience Him now as a loving God, compassionate and accepting of me. I feel I can go to God with my problems, that I can trust Him with everything. It is like God has come alongside me; as if He is surrounding me.

I even think of the relationship with my children. I see them differently now. I could previously not handle them very well. I was so tired and it caused me to be irritable and yell at them. God is busy changing not just me but also the children. Although they are still quite demanding, I find it easier to handle them. It is as if they now listen when I speak, so that the yelling is no longer necessary. My ways of being and of relating to my children are being transformed. I feel happier within myself, more true to who I wish to be.

Joan: Would you say you can now imagine God as wanting to empower you? I refer perhaps to a kind of power you and God share. Whereas previously you felt that God was judgmental, is it as if He now wants to have power with you, enabling you to meet the new challenges you have to face?

Yes. I am more relaxed and have more time to think. I feel I am able to make better decisions regarding my life. As soon as I have finished the course I am busy with, I would like to start something else. I want to get a better education; I want to progress, to develop as a person. I want my children to be proud of me; I want to give them the opportunities in life I never had.

2.8 LOUISE'S REFLECTIONS ON DIANA'S STORY

Diana indicated that she had nothing more to share with us, whereupon I asked Louisa what moved her in Diana's story that she might wish to discuss with us. She replied: 'The whole story moved me. There is so much I can relate to. What stands out for me is feelings of powerlessness often experienced by women in society today. The popular opinion of male domination gives men an excuse to abuse women and the culture "it's a man's world" protects them from accountability for their behaviour'.

She added: 'I have often come to a point in my life where I could no longer tolerate the way I was treated, but with little help and support it is not easy for a woman to cope on her own, especially if there are small children involved. You have come a long way and you have your in-laws to support you through this. Do not give up on your plans now. I am sure that before you know it, you will get where you want to be in life'.

CHAPTER THREE
REVERSING THE PROCESS OF MARGINALISATION:
RESOURCEFULNESS IN MEETING
THE CHALLENGES OF SINGLE PARENTING:
LOUISE TELLS HER STORY

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Louise's voice appears throughout the chapter, providing a personal biography. Please refer to the introductory comments of Chapter Two (2.1), as the same rationale was used to allow Louise's voice to be heard. The interpretative frameworks and themes used to build Louise's narrative into its final form stem from issues raised in 1.4.4 and 1.5 and stand in relation to discussions in 5.1 to 5.3 and 5.5. Discussions in 5.7 provide an alternative story to the story of abuse, giving her life new meaning through a rediscovered understanding of her spirituality.

3.2 GROWING UP IN THE FACE OF ABUSE: THE BEGINNING OF LOUISE'S STORY

Heartsore and rejection became part of my life the day I was born. I was third in a family of five children. At the time of my birth, my father was suffering from emotional and psychological problems which would determine my life's journey.

My father was an officer in the army, a rigid and domineering man. Everybody feared him. The relationship between my parents was one of great inequality – my father lorded it over my mother. He did not want to accept the two older children, stating that they were not his: the day I was born, he told my mother that I was their first child.

During the years when I grew up, my mother was a housewife, drawn to the role of caretaker and nurturer. Although she was subjected to an emotional tug-of-war – physical abuse, insecurity, depression and anger – she did not reject her obligations to her family; probably because she was unable to leave the little economic and emotional security the home gave her.

Alcohol became a big problem for both my parents and destroyed our family life: our home was chaotic and unpredictable. The reality of domestic violence created a climate of

vulnerability and fear we all had to live with and this affected all our relationships. Because my father believed that I was their first child, I always felt my mother hated me. All my life I have been searching for recognition, love and affection. Often my parents would argue, and to prevent herself from getting badly beaten by my father, my mother would pull me between them, using me as a shield.

As a child I did not realise just how broken and distorted the relationship between my mother and myself was. I loved her more than life. Through the years I became aware of a very special mother-daughter relationship between my mother and my sister. I was excluded from their conversations and longed, as every little girl does, to share with my mother my special secrets. My older sister and I did not really 'know' each other. For as long as I can remember, my mother influenced her not to play with me, always setting us against each other. Although I was not a tomboy, I grew up like one, as I had no choice other than to play and amuse myself with my brothers and their friends.

When I was in high school, I met a man ten years older than myself, divorced with two children. My father was away from home at the time and although he did not approve of the relationship, in his absence, my mother agreed to our seeing each other. He made me feel like a 'princess', because he bought me flowers and gifts. I was young and naïve and for the first time I came across somebody who made me feel good about myself. Sadly, I fell pregnant and had to leave school. I could not rely on my parents for support – they made me understand that I had disgraced them and ruined their lives.

Marrying the father of my child was not an option; he had deeply disappointed me and turned out to be somebody that could not be trusted. Without consulting me, my father set up a meeting between myself and a cousin who wished to adopt my baby. Although the future held much uncertainty, I knew that I did not want to give up my baby. I was, however, sent away to a home for unmarried mothers. My parents told me that they could not cope with my pregnancy; I think they were too embarrassed to face the community. This home was a place where I received warmth and acceptance. There were many other girls with me, all waiting for their babies to be born. The fathers of the unborn babies were out somewhere in a world that seemed cold and distant. Through the stories we shared, we supported and strengthened each other. It was a wonderful time of my life.

3.3 SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONFLICT BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE

Despite serious misgivings about our relationship, I loved my mother and desperately sought her acceptance. Once, I remember, my mother decided to leave home. I cannot remember which of the children she took with her, but I do remember running after her into the dark street begging her to take me with her. She answered me with a smack in the face and shouted: 'You go back to your father!' Afterwards I was haunted by the feeling that I was not loveable.

The reality of violence and feelings of intense rejection strongly influenced my spirituality during my growing years. Issues raised by the violence in my home, and a position of powerlessness to change anything about it perhaps helped me to grow spiritually. Looking back now, I realise that my childhood spirituality was very different to what I feel and experience now. It was not abstract ideas about God but rather my trust in God that carried me. Although I did not have a relationship with God, I knew of Him. My parents never attended church, only dropped us children off on Sundays. I know God was always there for me, although I must say my interaction with God was structured according to my most deeply felt needs. I sought God when I needed Him.

My parents returned from work most afternoons arguing. Often we would hide in our rooms until we felt the air had cleared and it was safe for us to come out. The ongoing violence and abuse had a profound effect on how I viewed my world. I often prayed and asked God to take away one of my parents. I believed they were only hurting each other, that they did not get on well and that it would be better if one of them would not return home. It was a thought pattern over which I did not have control; I could see no other way out. I believed God understood me, that He was against violence, on the side of life and wholeness. I can remember often praying and asking God to stop my father from beating and hurting my mother.

Through the years I often tried to find ways to talk with my mother about the pain and rejection I experienced during my growing years. When I was small, I loved her, but as I grew up I told myself she was not worthy of my love. I wanted answers so I could deal with the anger I felt toward her. Our conversations would turn out to be uncomfortable and unfruitful, as my mother was reluctant to talk about these issues.

Recently I have come to realise that my mother was not well and that if she were to die, I would be left concerned about the rift between us. I also realised that my mother had had to

cope with several set-backs as her children moved into adulthood. Hardship and a lack of voice was always part of her life: my father degraded her and due to the brutal use of his power she had no say in their marriage. He humiliated her by treating her like an object. When I consider the social forces that have shaped both her life and mine, I can begin to see that there was another side to her and it becomes possible to view her with compassion. Despite what happened in the past, I love her. I have realised that I could never know or understand the grief in my mother's heart.

This year, for the first time, my mother could also celebrate the joy of Mothers' Day. I decided to put the pain of the past behind me and send her a card. She had never received one from me before. I was not going to buy a card – it had to be my own handiwork. She did not understand my own inner struggle. It was hard to find words to express what I felt: I was nervous and cautious, trying to find words that would not offend her. It was a deeply spiritual experience, seeking to heal our painful relationship. I prayed and asked God to help me choose the right words. I felt very emotional as I tried to come to terms with my conflicting thoughts. It was as if I could feel the pain in my mother's heart – I could not be sure, but perhaps she also regretted having treated me the way she had in the past. I realised she had her own battles to fight and did not want to make life more difficult for her. I wrote in the card that I just wanted to thank her, that I no longer blamed her or had hard feelings.

Joan: Can you remember what the writing and sending of the card meant to you?

It was fantastic. The card was significant, not just for my mother but also for me. For years my mother and I had struggled to talk about the issues that stood between us. Because we realised that it would be painful, it was always left for some other day, some other time. Perhaps my mother thought that I had long ago buried these issues. She always reminded me that we are inclined to remember only the hurt of our lives, not the good and happy times. The realisation that my mother was not well made me think about a lot of things. Sending the card was for me, in a way, putting the past behind me.

When we were children, my sister and I did not speak much to each other. We were never friends. Yet I looked up to her in certain ways. I remember often sitting with her quietly while she would play the most beautiful pieces on the piano for me. I know she had to practise, but I also remember really enjoying her playing for me.

More recently my sister and I became better friends and got to speak to each other for the first time. She phoned and talked almost through the night. She said she was so sorry about

what happened between us. I think God touched her and showed her that what happened was wrong. My parents would not have told her, because they are 'blind'. What stood out for me is that my sister remembered all the times when she chose our cousins rather than me as her friends, and that she now truly regrets what happened.

3.4 RESILIENCE, HOPE AND SPIRITUALITY

[After the birth of her son, Louise returned to her parents' house for a while.]

When my son Petrus was still very small, I left my parent's home. Alone with little support from my family, I remained vulnerable in my efforts to support myself. My child was still very young when I met Kosie. [Kosie was divorced and had children from his previous marriage. Louise subsequently married him; at the time, he was her common law husband.] He was not really interested in Petrus; he did not want to become involved in any way. Because I lacked money and influence and had no friends or family I could call on, I remained in a relationship that kept me trapped in a position of dependence.

Searching for both some meaning and any solution to my problems, the years somehow strengthened my connectedness with God. I found it difficult to keep going or to plan a life ahead. Kosie does not think much of me; to him I am non-existent. I believe it is my relationship with God that has carried me all these years. In my struggle for dignity and full personhood, I have believed in the authority of my own direct experiences of God. God was always very real for me. I could depend on Him. Prayer has become part of my daily life and I believe that God answers prayers in His own time. These encounters with God in prayer have helped me to restructure my beliefs about myself, about life. Even as a child I had always felt God was there for me. He was present in a way my family would never be. It is something I have always had, a kind of strategy for resisting the hurt in my life, something I could hold onto in the face of despair. It is a continued resource from which I can draw when faced with difficult circumstances.

Joan: How did you get to know God or how did God enter your life, through your parents, or otherwise?

Small children often accept what they are told about God or Jesus. My parents were not really church goers, but I went to Sunday School – they insisted that we children attended regularly. I was very quiet as a child – I do not think I ever caused problems for my parents at

home or school. Yet, I was often frightened and I believe God gave me the security I lacked in my life at home.

I believe He brought people I needed across my path when I was not coping too well. When you (Joan) were assisting Petrus therapeutically, I often felt alone and overwhelmed by all the problems. I longed to have somebody to talk to. I did not expect anyone to help me, I needed somebody willing to just sit and listen. Whilst busy one day at the kitchen sink, I was close to tears when I brought this before God. I said that Petrus was being looked after through therapeutic assistance, but I was largely unassisted. It was literally a few minutes later when Reinette arrived. [Reinette, with other women, was involved in ministering on behalf of the church]. She was then a stranger to me but she mentioned that she knew of me and would like us to be friends. Since then a strong bond has developed between us. She has done so much for Petrus and me that I feel I will never be in a position to reciprocate. What I appreciate about her friendship is that although her life is very different to mine, she is never critical of me or prescriptive as to how I should live. Sometimes she would get in touch just by phoning me, sometimes giving me a verse from Scripture to uplift me. I believe God sent Reinette into my life.

Sure, there are also times when negative thoughts have had an impact on my spiritual strength. Some days I feel positive about life and my relationship with God; other days can be problematic. I believe the devil tries to poison one's thinking, continually telling you 'look at your life!' so that you are doubtful about whether God values you as a person. That is what life is like – it is an ongoing process of trying to get closer to God and getting to know Him better.

Through the years I attended church services and Kosie sometimes went with me. Often I felt God speaking to me because the sermon would be on issues very near to my heart at the time. These experiences would stay with me.

I also think of the early days in Cape Town when I faced much uncertainty about my future and had a problem with depression. One morning as I got off the bus on my way to work, I felt really sad. A man walked towards me, looked me in the eye and said 'Jesus loves you' – in passing. I give that moment to God. I never saw the man again, but I believe it was something he had to do – the message was from God.

I often marvel at the greatness of God's love, especially that out of the millions of people on earth He knows everything there is to know about me and is concerned about my well-being!

My life with God is a journey. A journey on which I am never alone. Do you know the poem about 'Footprints'? I so often reflect on that when I think of my own life. It is all about God's covenant with us, about His commitment and promise, the way in which He carries us in the context of an uncertain future.

Looking back now at all the problems Petrus experienced at school, I believe they taught me spiritual steadfastness and courage. Perhaps it was the hope I had in a better future that sustained me, a hope because of my faith.

3.5 MOTHERING AGAINST THE ODDS

From early on in our relationship until recently, Kosie had a problem with alcohol. His behaviour was often violent, so that my son witnessed scenes of domestic violence and abuse from a very young age. I have often come to a point in my life where I could no longer tolerate the way I was treated, but with very little outside help or support it is not so easy for a woman to cope on her own, especially if there are small children involved. I have struggled with the many conflicting demands placed on me and often wondered whether it was the right decision not to have Petrus adopted. He misses the love of a father and I am often saddened because of what I brought over him.

Domestic violence and ongoing battering compromised my health and undermined my self-confidence. I was often ill and in pain. Depression became a serious problem for me, affecting my life to the extent that I had to be institutionalised. I was often absent from work and was eventually dismissed by my employer. I lost everything I had worked for during eight years, including the flat I had secured.

Living with a physically abusive man, I was always aware of the threat of violence and often felt the need for protection for myself and my child. There is also uncertainty as to whether one would receive justice from the police or courts if one sought help, especially because I was not married to Kosie. I lacked resources for survival and self-support; all the things that make life possible.

My life with Kosie was sometimes simply unbearable and, as a result, I would move back to my parents. Every time this happened, I hoped to start on my own again – searching for healing within a loving community that could provide support and understanding. As my parents own a restaurant, the idea was that I would work in the family business and be able to repay them for board and lodging. My mother is a submissive woman who never has the

courage to go against my father. From the moment I arrived he would make me understand that I was under his roof and dependent on him. He was very prescriptive about how he wanted things done, with a seeming inability to speak with any civility. My staying with them was always abortive. I never had the impression that they tried to be there for Petrus and me. I felt abandoned, as there was little or no support from them or concern for my circumstances. When Kosie would subsequently contact me, asking me to give our relationship another chance, I always returned. As soon as I arrived back with my suitcases it was always as if he knew he had won, and I would be back to square one. It happened so many times: I would leave Kosie only to return to him some days or weeks later. Nothing ever changed in the home I returned to. It was an untenable arrangement, with my parents becoming increasingly reluctant to assist me further.

This instability and uncertainty severely affected Petrus, causing him problems at school from the very first day, and he had to repeat Grade I. His teachers reported that he lacked the ability to concentrate in class, that he was overactive and that his general behaviour interfered with classroom activities. With no emotional support or assistance from Kosie, I often felt incapable of coping with the stress. I approached a psychologist for assistance with Petrus and he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Ritalin was prescribed.

A few years ago we left Cape Town to move to the country. Work was extremely scarce and our financial situation was desperate. I managed to obtain part-time employment for five hundred Rand per month. Petrus was now 10 years old and had already attended four different schools. Trouble was part of his daily life. I received numerous phone calls from the headmaster regarding behavioural problems at school. I was notified that Petrus would be expelled if the situation did not improve.

Petrus was constantly under the 'spotlight'. Children at school stopped playing with him and he expressed much unhappiness about school and the treatment he received from teachers. Numerous phone calls from the headmaster, almost on a daily basis, made me feel incompetent as a mother. I was blamed for everything. Although Petrus was receiving therapeutic assistance, the headmaster was adamant that he would not tolerate any further breaches of discipline. Eventually the school board agreed that Petrus be asked to leave the school voluntarily. Because this was the only school in our town, this meant that Petrus and I would be separated. This thought alone caused me much heartsore, as we had never been separated before. Kosie was not sympathetic or willing to assist me, and I had no finances of my own to pay for Petrus's board and schooling in another town.

During discussions with Social Welfare, we looked at all the factors affecting Petrus's life at the time, particularly the fact that I was not able to support myself and him financially and the impact of ongoing abuse on his future growth and development. Suggestions put forward to send him to a children's home really frightened me and I was confronted with many questions. I asked myself to what extent Petrus's behaviour would improve if he was no longer with me. What kind of assistance could he expect? I was concerned that at the children's home he would become involved with other children who would 'pull him down' rather than assist him. I did not know what he would end up with. This uncertainty brought me much anxiety and I spent a lot of the time crying.

There is a general conception that children are placed in homes because of neglect by their parents. This is not necessarily true. Despite what had happened in our home between Kosie and myself, there was still an extremely strong bond between Petrus and me. Although there were times previously when I wondered if adoption would not have been a better option, the sheer fact that I was so important to Petrus is what kept me going through the years. I struggled through the pain, brought on not only by my current situation, but also by my own past, only to be there for Petrus. I loved him more than life. From where I stood, the decision to place him in a children's home was very difficult. I was concerned about how Petrus would be affected by the loss of whatever home I had been able to provide, as well as losing a familiar neighbourhood and friends. I was given time to think and work through these issues, and also the opportunity to come up with any alternative suggestions which would be beneficial to the future growth and development of my son. I was, however, faced with the reality that in all my relationships, I had no meaningful support, no one who could help me.

I had been in a 'battle' with the school and had suffered for several months. I was exhausted and tired of the struggle. Finally, I made peace with the idea that it was not about my mothering skills, but my circumstances that worked against Petrus's development. However, when I shared the news with my parents, my worst fears were confirmed. They pointed fingers again; I was once more the one incompetent to look after my child. My father criticised me and questioned my willingness to agree to the children's home in the first place. You can imagine how torn I felt because of the desperate situation I was in. They had no idea how difficult this decision had been for me; but what was the alternative? I tried to be brave for Petrus, but was nevertheless heartsore and uncertain about what the future held for us.

3.6 STILL AMAZING GRACE

The day Petrus left for the children's home, I was overcome with sadness. I had to rely on you (Joan) to make arrangements with Social Welfare to take me along and to show me around the children's home. Although I cried all the way to Cape Town, I experienced a calmness when I walked in at the home. It was amazing. They were expecting us; everyone was very friendly and everything was explained to me. They also showed me Petrus's bedroom. By the time I had to leave, I had stopped crying.

Until then I was emotionally very involved with Petrus. I know that people were put in place to assist me. Petrus's house mother is a gift from heaven. Thinking back now, they got on well from the first day. Petrus receives a great deal of love and understanding; he is growing to be more independent and is able to function much better in his new environment.

What has special importance for me now, more than anything, is the healing that has taken place for all of us, myself, Kosie and Petrus. I have matured so much through it all and I am now able to stand back; I am no longer over-involved with Petrus, probably because I see so many changes in him and he is progressing well.

Petrus has been away for two years now. At the end of 2002 he was awarded a merit certificate. I could not attend the previous prize-giving because we did not have a car and money was very short. This time, however, was different. I had to be there. He had done so well. On the certificate it mentioned that Petrus showed outstanding progress in maths, that he was a very talented handyman and an unusually creative artist. It also stated that he showed positive character development. As a parent, it really meant a lot to me. It was good to see that my child also managed to be amongst those receiving prizes. I was very proud of him; I always knew he could do it.

Joan: Who in your family is noticing the changes in Petrus?

Recently during a visit to my parents, my mother spoke with him alone and told him that she was proud of him; she noticed how much he had changed. When my son was born, it was my father's wish that he be called Petrus. Although I was not keen on the name, I agreed, because it was in memory of my father's younger brother who had died in a car accident. This brother had excelled in music. When Petrus was much smaller, my father often expressed a wish for him to play a musical instrument. At the children's home it all came

together. Petrus is now playing the piano and is doing really well. My father especially is appreciating this gift Petrus has.

Joan: You said that much healing has taken place for yourself, Petrus and Kosie. Can you explain to me more fully how this healing took place? How did you experience it?

For me, healing lies in being able to live a more fulfilled life, being happier within myself and in the things I do. I experience the healing mostly in our ways of interacting. Words can hurt very much. Also the fact that Petrus went away – I think Kosie sensed my pain. It is as if all of us have become far more sensitive to the ‘connectedness’ amongst ourselves which helps us to respect each other more.

Joan: Do you think it is God who heals?

I think when healing comes, God is instrumental. Often we may not see it this way, but the healing itself has a lot to do with the relationship between ourselves and God. In the Bible God is the One who heals.

Joan: Can it be that the healing for all of you occurred at a time of choice, when you had to decide about the children’s home? As individuals, the three of you faced the possibility of fragmentation or rebuilding and growth. Can it be that a decisiveness was born out of this reality, a resolve for a more intense rebuilding of relationships which encompassed healing and the possibility of perhaps a different kind of future?

When Petrus left for the children’s home, it was difficult for me to continue to live in the face of personal problems I had. Kosie was still drinking and treated me badly. I had to think of my own health, my ability to support myself and my sense of self-worth. These problems often caused me to despair. If I think now of how I prayed – this is the closest I believe one comes to God, when you are really down in the gutter, but life has to go on. I grieved about the loss of Petrus, about my own life; it was all wrapped up in the most intense feelings of anger, guilt and loneliness. Then ... something happened. Kosie told me he was never going to drink again and asked me to marry him. So often when people give up alcohol, there is still the craving. This is not the case with Kosie – he has never ‘touched’ alcohol from that day.

I have searched the depths of my soul for an answer. The search only deepened my conviction that it is grace, a gift of God that makes possible the amazing changes in people’s lives. If I have to tell you how many times before he tried to give up alcohol, but nothing

helped! The problems with alcohol also interfered with the relationship Kosie had with his own children through the years. I really believe he will never drink again; I am so certain of it I even told his children.

Joan: To have faced the issues that you did and to come out on the other side so much stronger must have given you a sense of the mystery of God, of some greater Power?

There are many things I cannot explain. With Petrus away, I have often felt there was nothing to live for any longer. It is as if out of all this a deeper reality was born; that Somebody much greater than ourselves is in control. If you ask what sustained me and helped me to move forward, what provided the courage to do things and not just give in, it must have something to do with this Power greater than myself. When I have something very difficult to face and I know I cannot cope on my own, I turn to God. I know people reach this source of Power through many different means. I do not attend church that often, but I read my Bible and pray. Through my prayers I am never alone.

Joan: What happens to you when you pray? Do you sense that God hears those words whenever you pray?

He hears because I feel immediately comforted. My prayers are not filled with meaningless words. I am guided by what is in my heart. It is like talking to someone who truly cares for me; it is as if the heaviness is lifted and I do not feel so deeply alone anymore.

3.7 'DOING' THEOLOGY AND 'LIVING' SPIRITUALITY

I see each person as having his or her own spiritual style. I do not think it is something that can be prescribed with regard to how it should be. I see spirituality as one's own process of growth which is ongoing. In order to grow, one has to reach out to others, and in so doing you do what God wants of you. The more you seek God, the more you grow spiritually. I think one should be focused on what God wants from you.

Many years ago, there was an elderly couple who had a significant influence on my spiritual growth. One day I said to the old lady that I so much wished I could be a child of God. I said this because my life was a mess and I felt that this often came between myself and God. I was looking at how 'good' people lived and I felt I was not one of them. She said: 'But of course you are a child of God. He made you and He loves all his children!' Those words meant a lot to me; despite the fact that my life was in a shambles, I still remained God's child.

Although Kosie no longer has a problem with alcohol, he still does not pay any attention to me. Although we are now married, I get the feeling that he does not really notice anything. Employment is scarce and with Petrus away, I often feel alone and bored. I have painted the inside of the house and planted the lawn in the front garden. Kosie will tell others what I did, but he will hardly ever thank me or make me feel good about it. It is as if I find myself constantly having to work on ways for us to interact with each other in order to create conditions of mutual respect. Sometimes he speaks to me in demeaning ways.

Surprisingly, however, whereas previously I made just as much noise as he did, I now answer him back quietly and in a decent way. I feel good when I make him understand that I will no longer let it go unnoticed; instead, I speak out about our differences, my own needs and pain. It has a positive effect on our relationship because he often thinks about what he has said and then offers an apology afterwards. It seldom happened before. It is not easy and it requires much courage and energy on my part, but it gives me a sense of empowerment. Much of what I do is to give Petrus a better home and future. I also so much desire a better, richer life before God. We have been through a lot, but I suppose it takes time. However, I can say that Kosie has changed in many other ways since he has given up alcohol.

The bond between Petrus and me is all we have. The fact that we have suffered and witnessed so much abuse, yet have managed to get through it, makes us both stronger. When he comes home, I often lie with him on his bed. We hold each other tightly and we often talk. Petrus and I are very honest and open with each other. I often share with him everything God does for me. He knows I pray for him. I also know that God is important for Petrus. I can sense it. In his drawing book he has written 'The Lord is my Shepherd' and he has copied out different texts from Scripture. Petrus is a very caring person. When he comes home for the school holidays, he brings a small gift bought from his pocket money for Kosie and myself. He even went to the pavement stalls and selected a pair of shoes for me which he brought as a gift: he did this all on his own! He often picks me a few fresh flowers and surprises me.

Joan: How do you think you could build on the godly within yourself and also in others?

I have a strong need to work for God. I am striving to get my life in order, to put my own life right before God. More than anything I want to learn to live in the Light.

Joan: What do you think this calling is asking of you?

I do not think it is about telling people what the Bible says and being prescriptive as to how they should live. The problem we are faced with today is that there are very few people who have the time or willingness to listen. I would like to be there to listen to the problems of others and share their pain. That is what it means for me to actively be there for people. The road I have travelled and the hard times I have survived have equipped me in a way. I would like to support other women like myself who might need a shoulder to lean on.

Before we were married, Kosie and I had been struggling financially for a long time, because he remained unemployed. I phoned the pastor of our church to ask if he could not help us out temporarily; we had no food in the house. He came to visit only to tell me that the church could not assist us financially while we were living in sin. He also indicated that he found it difficult to understand why I was living with Kosie; according to him, I did not have a decent home. When I shared this with Kosie, he was very hurt. We felt the rejection and discrimination. At this point, Reinette came into my life and invited me to go to church with her. Instead of criticising Kosie, she said that the Lord would not want her to judge him or to neglect him. I know she prays for him.

3.8 DIANA'S REFLECTIONS ON LOUISE'S STORY

Louise indicated that she had nothing more to share with us, whereupon I asked Diana what had moved her in Louise's story, if she had any comments she wished to make.

Looking at Louise, Diana commented: 'I was touched by the fact that you often wondered whether your choice to keep your baby as opposed to adoption was the right one. We live in a world where it is believed that a child should have a father and a mother; and, sure, if circumstances allow it, it would probably be the best. My children have a father, but he is never there for them, never even kicks a ball with them, yet he says he loves them. Take my own childhood; I knew I had a father but he was never there for me – I never felt that he loved me. So, what is the best? To know that you have a father, but who has little or nothing to do with you, or not to have a father at all? I am in a marital relationship where I have to be both mother and father. I have to read to my children from the Bible, their father wants to be the "head" of the family, but he does not accept the responsibility that comes with it. What stands out for me is that despite all your difficulties, an enormously strong emotional bond developed between you and Petrus. It tells me that Petrus also knows that you are there for him and that despite all else, you did what you thought was best given the circumstances.'

She added: 'I was, however, also aware of other emotions. As you were telling about your decision to have Petrus sent to the children's home, I shared your pain but also found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that Petrus had to leave because of the problems he experienced at home. I wondered why you would do all that for a man. As your story unfolded, I sensed the growth that had taken place within your family. When Petrus left for the home you were forced to let go of him and were left to grieve his loss. You were incredibly strong in all this. The only way out was to work through the issue of separation, which, over time, brought new insights and also much healing for all of you. Your unfailing faith is also something which touched me. Your story speaks convincingly of your faith and trust in God. Whereas I often doubted my standing before God, your relationship with God was something you could always hold on to.'

3.9 THE END OF THE JOURNEY?

I asked Diana and Louise whether they had anything else they would like to share with you, the reader. They both announced that they felt we had come to the close of our storytelling, and expressed a sense of sadness that the end of our journey together was in sight. I told them that I was curious to hear from them how our meetings together had helped them to tell their stories in ways that made them stronger. Their response to this question is given in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER FOUR

DIANA'S STORY IN THE CONTEXT OF A LITERATURE SURVEY

4.1 BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK – VARIOUS DISCOURSES

In this chapter, the personal narrative of Diana (as voiced in Chapter Two) is analysed within the framework of postmodernity, 'a new era, arguing that the subject is constructed by the meanings given to it in discourse; that is, a "manner of speaking about things" of a group in society, marked by its interests and its amount of power' (Bons-Storm 1996:78).

Parker and Shotter (1990:142) write that 'every day talk is situated or contextualised, and relies upon its situation for its sense'. A radical view of discourse holds that our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, our sense of ourselves in the world and our ways of understanding our relation to the world are constituted through language and discourse (Weedon 1987:32). Discourse works through language, and through language it shapes what we can know (Weingarten 1995:10). Language then not only constructs identities but continually reinforces cultural and social discourses. Accordingly, the way in which a person is *positioned* within the terms of a discourse is central to an understanding of the way in which people are *constituted* through and in terms of existing discourses (Davies 1992:54). Subject constitution within discourse implies the construction of an identity, which can be good or bad.

Through social interaction and her positioning within social and religious discourses, Diana became involved in the process of constructing a particular world and reality and the knowledge thus attained became context-dependent. The problem dominated story by which Diana lived suggested that she was unworthy and incompetent, and was not able to 'measure' up to society's expectations. Believing that she could never do enough to earn God's love contributed powerfully to a 'spoiled' sense of self and the perpetuation of the problem-saturated story.

4.1.1 Patriarchy

We all tell stories influenced by the ideology of the social-political-religious context in which we exist. Not all stories inspire hope and connection – many oppress and constrain, bringing despair and isolation. Stories about problems are often repeated and can thus become dominant; they may even be thought of as the only possible story or way of speaking about

certain events. ‘ “Problems” in people’s lives only survive and thrive when they are supported and backed up by particular ideas, beliefs and principles’ (Morgan 2000:45).

Diana’s self-narrative provided a place where the social expectations which shaped the behaviour between herself and her husband became perceptible (Bons-Storm 1996:47). The dominant story acquired its status and remained powerful because of patriarchal presumptions, which render many of society’s transactions as ‘taken-for-granted’ (Bons-Storm 1996:134). Radford Ruether (1996:173) defines patriarchal societies ‘as those in which the rule of the father is the basic principle of social organisation of the family and of society as a whole’.

Reflecting on Diana’s growing years, I came to understand how her sense of self and ideas regarding womanhood became socially and culturally specific. Diana grew up without a father-figure, and her mother, divorced and struggling to cope financially, became her primary figure of identification, the significant other. If children feel they can never earn the approval of parents, however hard they try, it may affect the way they think about themselves, their selfhood, causing feelings of low self-esteem and guilt (Murphy 1996:90). In the relationship with her mother, an identity of inadequacy was constructed, Diana confessing she was ‘never able to do anything right to please [her] mother’. Her mother also taught her ‘to be the least’, which cultivated a sense of submission and obedience in line with the tenets of patriarchy. Murphy (1996:89) states that parents set different expectations for their daughters and sons, and these ‘decisions’ are made within the broader social context of what is expected of women and men in a patriarchal society, and the submissiveness advocated by Diana’s mother fits into patriarchal expectations for girl children. This insight is in line with the recognition expressed in teachings of feminist spirituality of the belief that women have been socialized to suppress their own feelings and responses (Fischer 1988:8).

After marriage, Diana’s self worth and ideas of what it meant to be a ‘proper’ woman, ideas also promoted by church and society, were further determined by her husband. Patriarchal discourse has structured the social system into hierarchical dualisms of male over female (Radford Ruether 1996:174). Early in her married life Diana came to accept the fact that it was quite ‘natural’ for her husband to take away things with which she occupied herself, like knitting, painting or baking, completing these himself. Having been brought up in circumstances where she doubted her own competence, she did not regard this as an imposition, seeing her husband as a ‘multi-talented’ man who was able to do things better than herself. Being disciplined to be ‘good’ girls and women, the right to self-expression

becomes constrained so that women refrain from saying anything that might harm relationships with those close to them (Neuger 2001:80).

The patriarchal language of hierarchical dualism, which assumes that man is by nature superior to woman, because he is allegedly more rational (Murphy 1996:85), socialised Diana's understanding of a 'proper' relationship between herself and her husband. As he was constituted as her provider, she considered him to be wiser, to be more able than she and to be at the centre of her life. Because he demonstrated that he could do everything more skilfully than she could, even some things that in terms of patriarchal expectations with regard to 'male' and 'female' activities are usually seen as 'female' (such as knitting), their relationship was patterned along lines that kept her in a position of inferiority and dependence, masked by the discourse as natural and taken-for-granted. Davies (1992:54) states that 'by taking up as her own the discourses through which femaleness is constituted, each woman thus becomes at the same time a speaking subject and one who is subjected or determined by those discourses. The subjection is generally *invisible*, because it appears not only to be *natural*, but also to be what women want, a result of free choice!' (Davies's emphases).

Prest and Keller (1993:140) claim that family structures are believed to be determined by and bonded through coherence via the process of language. Events that place apart the family as a human system are given meaning by each individual in the family through interaction with the others in the family. Many of these configurations become 'consensual agreements', as they are experienced by family members and across generations. Anderson and Goolishian (1988:372) suggest that 'meaning and understanding are socially and intersubjectively constructed'.

The 'consensual agreement' contained in patriarchal discourse socialised Diana to fulfil the roles allotted to her because of her womanhood; she saw herself as responsible for domestic work and child care. Radford Ruether (1996:174) states that culture, particularly through religion, continues to praise and elevate as an example of the perfect wife a woman whose main work is in the home. What was 'normal' for Diana was patriarchally defined; a man's rightful domain is in the public world where the 'big' decisions are made, whilst a woman's proper place is the private world, at home, caring for the household and children (Bons-Storm 1996:50). Fischer (1988:39) states that women have traditionally been led to believe they must choose between caring for the self and nurturing relationships. The dilemma is caused once again by a dualistic world view which distinguishes between individual and relational conditions of existence (Fischer 1988:40). Early on in their marital relationship,

after the birth of their first child, 'he assisted me for the first two weeks after which he withdrew completely,...only later did I understand his sentiments regarding our home and the rearing of our children'. Diana's husband appears to have been at the centre of her life; she had the calling and duty to serve his career and social image, not vice versa, she sees herself as 'seeing to the needs of our home and the baby as well as being married to his plans'! Diana's story also highlights the enigma of why placing others before the self should be regarded by patriarchy as a particular and proper aspect of women's spirituality (Fischer 1988:41).

4.1.2 Religion

The struggle for power in the formulation of what is considered knowledgeable and true is often evidenced in the way the written Word is interpreted and taught, emphasising the putative objectivity of that which is 'true', and eliminating or minimising that which is 'subjective' or doubtful. Significantly, Diana sought to rely on Scripture for courage and inspiration; yet, her husband and some members of the church used Scripture to subject her to unfair and discriminating practices. She often felt that she was not able to voice her own experiences of God, and to discover their importance in shaping her understanding of herself and the world. Her interpretations, her feelings and values were considered unimportant; as she says, 'I had no weapons for this fight'! Spirituality has been commonly associated with subjectivity and because subjective constructs are harder to identify, such an approach in obtaining knowledge is typified as 'value laden' (Prest & Keller 1993:139) and most often ignored or minimised.

Heise and Steitz (1991:22) suggest that behavioural patterns resulting from dualistic thinking (viewing men and women as separate and independent), have a common source in patriarchy, which have been confirmed over the centuries by a male-centred interpretation of the Genesis story. Patriarchal writing allows men to occupy central stage so that women become invisible or unimportant (Fischer 1988:105). Religious language is often constructed along God-language, or metaphors for God, which undermine women's equal sacredness; church practices often deny women full participation (Fischer 1988:17). However, Jesus interacted with women on several occasions and never disparaged or belittled them. Bons-Storm (1996:144) states that the disciples disapproved of the respect Jesus accorded women, and that the heart of the struggle goes on in the existing lives of women, as this attitude is still found in our society and churches today.

Diana's story indicates the ways in which the dominant socio-cultural narrative and the dominant Christian narratives are meshed, reinforcing one another (Bons-Storm 1996:122). She was positioned within the broader context of patriarchy and religious discourse, keeping her in a situation of inferiority through its construction of 'family' in society. Religious discourse suggests that there is a natural order or hierarchy sanctioned by God, fashioning a patriarchal religious construction that keeps this order in place. Both the Jewish and Christian traditions have been so male-dominated that many women feel inferior. This is because men have the power to define woman's roles; women seldom have this power (Squire 1978:329). Diana learned from the pulpit and study groups that the husband is the master of the household, and that as a 'good' woman it was her duty to be submissive and obedient. Her destiny allegedly lay in her vocation as wife and mother, roles which reflected the natural order ordained by God. Since this hierarchy favours the dominant group, that group does not have to justify the narrative; the 'truth' of the narrative is accepted as 'God-willed'.

Poling (1991:29) argues that 'the ideology of the family is one of the structures of domination and control that create conditions for abuse and power; making the abuse of power a theological problem'. Diana seemed to be the only one called upon to make sacrifices for the sake of those dear to her, and sought the good of others before her own. Much of her inner conflict remained unspoken, because it was covered in narratives of Christian love. Her husband moved in and out of employment, which not only brought much instability to her family life, but also great financial hardship. She remembers: 'I got used to counting the grocery bill in my head, and my children and I only knew second hand clothes and shoes which had to be good for Sunday and every other day'.

She struggled to find a space for herself, an identity in both religious life and everyday society, that would give her equality as a human being. Marginality, as evidenced in Diana's story, is 'to be in the margin, to be part of the whole but outside the main body' (Hooks, quoted in Fischer 1988:45). Poling (1991:14) states that although the church and society claim to be concerned regarding human affliction and injustice, it has been incapable of overcoming these problems.

4.2 THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER AND DOMINATION AND HOW IT CHARACTERISES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESE DISCOURSES

Ideas constructed by patriarchal and religious discourse have been given a 'truth' status and have determined ways in which societies have been organised. The 'truth' status of any

discourse involves an element of power; with knowledge and power continually in interplay within discourse, producing types of knowledge regarded as 'truths' which in turn determine who we are.

Power operates whenever people interact – to be in a relationship is to be involved in an exercise of power. A domineering misuse of power prevailed in Diana's marriage relationship, where her husband made all the decisions, even those which directly affected her life, giving her little or no opportunity to voice her opinion. Such power has a one-directional flow of influence, where one person assumes control at the expense of the other. Diana's story, in which she was positioned not as an actor but as a passive recipient, often prevented her from formulating and stating her desires as a woman, resulting in feelings of guilt and isolation: 'I often wondered how much more God wanted from me!' The experience of powerlessness which resulted from her subordinate place in church and society appears to have been at the heart of many of Diana's spiritual struggles, a phenomenon pointed out also by Fischer (1988:133). Power, as the ability to speak for oneself or to exercise some control over events, is synonymous with life itself (Poling 1991:25). The power dimension in relationships therefore becomes central, not peripheral to a person's spirituality.

Poling (1991:27) states that the abuse of power 'depends upon institutions and ideologies'. Diana's marriage was ordered along lines of subservience, thereby crafting conditions for the abuse of power. Any situation in which there is a power structure in which relationships are understood in terms of superiority and inferiority stifles the possibility of mutuality and interdependence. Biblical hierarchy, as depicted by Diana's husband in a pyramid form, became the script which determined her life. Sanctioned by religion, it became an obstacle to her freedom.

In respect of the above comments, feminist writers have exposed the patriarchal notion of a 'theology of ownership', which suggests that humanity was given dominion over God's creation, 'dominion' being interpreted as 'keeper' or 'guardian'. Along with the idea of ownership comes a tendency to objectify that which is owned, so that the needs of the owner are considered primary and the purpose of the owned is to serve the needs of the owner (Bohn, quoted in Neuger 2001:97). Diana's story speaks of continuous financial hardship. Wanting to improve their financial situation and eager to invest in her own growth and development as a person, she proposed the idea of finding employment for herself. Within the framework of the 'ownership paradigm', her husband regarded women who work outside the home as contradictory to God's will. Because he ruled that the idea was unsuitable, his unquestioned authority constituted a restrictive power relationship which did not allow

individuality or freedom of accomplishment. It prevented her from using her gifts and strengths.

The effect of the power of social and cultural discourses is also evidenced in the way Diana questioned her own feelings and ideas about herself and her relationship with God. Because her husband spent considerably more time than she did in reading the Bible, thereby 'becoming more religious', she accepted his assessment regarding her spiritual life. In society her husband was regarded as a 'God-fearing man', making her feel that she must be in the wrong, that the censure she felt must somehow be warranted. Intensified efforts to be a dutiful wife or 'proper' mother did not help her in finding a path to growth and holiness. When she tried to assert herself by questioning traditional norms and the effect of these on her daily life, the responses from a pastor and friends produced a sense of unease. She was told that 'divorce was not from God' and that as a woman she should 'respect and trust her husband'. Although she resisted their viewpoints ('They do not know him as I do, they do not live with him!'), she felt incapable of challenging the existing structures, given her lack of information, alternative role models and limited educational opportunities.

4.3 THE MAINTENANCE OF POWER AND DOMINATION IN DISCOURSE

4.3.1 Language, relationship, metaphor and spirituality

'Spirituality comes into being as one's commitment to relatedness – to other people, the environment, one's God or the numinous, one's heritage, one's body – becomes the paramount concern that organises understanding and action' (Griffith & Griffith 2002:219).

We can therefore argue that spirituality emerges from relationships (Fischer 1988:42); that as individuals we exist only in relationship; that the self is constructed through relationships; and that the interaction between self and others becomes the rhythm of life itself. Who we are and what we know about ourselves, our world and God is constructed in a context, with language as the tool in the formulation of such knowledge. Meaning and understanding in relationship therefore happens in language (Anderson & Goolishian 1988:37). Through language and dialogue, intersubjective meanings around spirituality are generated (Prest & Keller 1993:140), so that when a person speaks about his/her spirituality, it will be in terms of meaning created through particular relationships and specific language that shapes the form of those relationships.

Carlson and Erikson (2000:65) are of the opinion that relationships are seen as key factors in the constitution and continuation of one's identity story, suggesting that our spirituality, our relationship with God and the images we have of God are constructed by means of and in terms of the relationships we have with most of the significant others in our lives. Such relationships are also most powerful in constructing a person's dominant identity story, because these relationships are situated in a particular language which not only shapes and informs our impressions of reality, but constitutes a force creating a particular view of reality and of the self. This suggests that the most significant relationship can be a creative liberating force, becoming a basis of power in the emerging self, or it can be oppressive, limiting and damaging (Squire 1978:330), stunting the spirit and individual growth.

Griffith and Griffith (2002:87) state that 'we are *lived* by our stories'. This implies that while we are 'always shaping and creating our life stories, we are also shaped by the stories we tell ourselves and are told by others about who we are and can be' (Griffith & Griffith 2002:82). Our voices speak what is on our minds and express what is deeply felt in the spirit. Diana's narrative, reflecting a disempowering spirituality, is created from frameworks available to her. Language, and even more powerfully, metaphors, available to her from her mother, her husband, the church and friends, provided her with the raw material and the framework from which she developed her personal narrative. Her story reflects the discourses of power, how the discourses positioned her within its terms, and provided knowledge out of which she created her life (Neuger 2001:74).

Diana's mother, overworked and struggling to raise three children on her own, did not tell her about an available God, who could be a comforter in times of trouble. Instead, she heard of a punitive and angry God, remote and removed from the world. Given that language and experience are interrelated, and that language controls and limits our experiences, the God-talk Diana was exposed to provided images that bounded and limited possibilities for her to experience the Divine in life-giving and powerful ways. Coupled with feelings of incompetence and inadequacy, she found it hard to believe in her own worth and God's love for her. Not surprisingly, her spiritual experiences, founded on a mental image of God as the exacting judge, remote and uninvolved in her life, constituted a world in which she struggled continually to get closer to God.

Diana admits that her experience of church and religion served to bind her even more. During her growing years, feelings of being abandoned by God were further emphasised by the language she heard from the pulpit and in traditional church rituals and ceremonies. These did not bring God any closer – God was high and transcendent, His plans and

purposes for her life remained inexplicable. Whatever form God's self-communication takes, conventional churchgoing was rarely open to or expectant of such experiences. She considered it to be a 'theology from the top,' which did not connect with her 'lived' experiences regarding God's place in her life; 'they have words enough; but only words that do not say certain things' (Lange, quoted in Bons-Storm 1996:31). Having grown up without a father-figure, coupled with feelings of intense rejection, it became difficult for her to believe in her own sacredness, her power and capacity to comprehend the Divine, so that these feelings gave rise to spiritual barrenness and isolation.

McFague (1982:193) suggests that through metaphorical thinking we attempt to express that which is unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. Diana experienced church talk as a medium providing models of God that were masculine, rigid and remote with the added complication that biblical hierarchy structured the relationship between herself and her husband into one of domination and control. Whilst Diana experienced first-hand the debilitating and emotionally painful circumstances of having no voice in her marriage, Diana's church continued to extol the virtues of subservience and obedience by women. This form of theological language not only limited the richness and complexity of God as made known through Scripture, it kept her in bondage by structuring her interpersonal relationships in a fashion which had an impact on her selfhood, undermining her sense of mutuality and independence. As a result she came to view God as being on the side of her husband.

4.3.2 Religious fundamentalism

Griffith and Griffith (2002:219) state that 'expressions of religious and spiritual experiences are harmful when they violate the relatedness on which spirituality is based'. The belief system of her husband was based on 'us/them' categories; he was always critical of her relationship with God and blamed her spiritual inadequacy for the problems they experienced. Spending all his free time reading the Bible and seeking to become more religious and devout, he did not realise that the intensity of his religious beliefs violated her spirituality. As a result, Diana felt she was always competing with her husband regarding her spiritual life, causing feelings of isolation and despair.

Griffith and Griffith (2002:226) also argue that the belief systems of religious and spiritual people can convince them that only they have 'the truth'. When religiously fundamental ideas organise people in terms of a hierarchy, exploitation and control commonly occurs. This is evidenced in Diana's story when she tried to find employment for herself to improve their

financial situation. By making use of well-chosen Biblical texts, her husband misused Scripture to instruct Diana regarding her place in the home and society.

4.4. ANOTHER STORY?

4.4.1 Resistance, empowerment and spirituality

Frank (1995:181) writes that ‘humans are not alone even if being with God is a process of resistance, contest and wound. Often it is through the wounds and scars of life that we become aware of God’s presence; *to be is to wrestle with God*, it is in the wounds of resistance that people gain a power: to tell and even to heal’.

Empowerment takes place when, through the stories they tell, women who are victims of abuse experience an empathetic bond between themselves and the listener, especially when they feel that they are being heard. By telling her story, she not only recovers her voice, she becomes a witness to the circumstances that have silenced her voice. Empowerment lies not only in the truth of the story as it is experienced, but also in what becomes experience through the telling and its reception. Weingarten (1995:21) calls it ‘radical listening’, a way of listening which affirms a person’s self-worth and helps her regain a preferred sense of identity and power.

Diana shared her experience of the day she found the courage to engage in a conversation with her pastor (after they had moved to a new church) about her relationship with God. She presented moving detail of having talked with someone who was not interested in what she called a ‘one-sided conversation’, commenting: ‘he was really interested in me and in what I had to say!’ She experienced a theological presence in the way he listened, in his support, in his non-threatening and compassionate assistance. The conversation was the beginning of the progression towards her own entitlement to voice, long buried in the training to be a ‘good’ woman and in the demand that she never say anything that might risk rupturing relationships around her. The conversation with the pastor brought home to her a theology of hope; her identity was reshaped by a theology of grace. Someone felt she was worth listening to; her voice was heard and taken seriously. He restored in her a sense of her own credibility and worth as a person.

What were the ‘ingredients’ in this conversation that empowered Diana in terms of discovering her own voice and authentic spirituality? Bons-Storm (1996:81) writes that a person becomes aware of her own voice and possibilities when touched by others, where

'being touched' means being mentioned, or taken seriously. Considering the ways in which language itself becomes a powerful tool to open up possibilities for stories to be voiced, in ways that give rise to a preferred sense of self, I believe it was the pastoral 'quality' of the conversation inviting her, by its graciousness, to become whole again and to go her way, using her own voice. God happened in their midst, in their communication that healed the pain of brokenness and encouraged them to speak and act in solidarity: 'He listened to my questions and insights whilst at the same time offering prayer; affirmation and suggestions to further assist me in my spiritual growth'.

4.4.2 New thinking, new language and new metaphors for God

Fischer (1988:64) states that *attention*, or desire directed toward God, can bring about direct experiences of God. This resonates with what Harris (1988:14) writes about spiritual growth, that it is not a process of moving from *lower to higher*, as in climbing the steps on a staircase, but rather a process of moving to the *centre*. New images and metaphors for God do not occur if we remain on the periphery, we must relate mutually with the image in order to establish a relationship with God (Fischer 1988:66).

Diana began to redefine the picture she had of God and this had a significant effect on her everyday life. The road she decided to travel took her to the gospel concert where she was inspired by the message of the Cross. She identified with Jesus because of her own suffering and because, based on the spirit of testimonies in the Bible, He understood women and was interested in what they said and did (Neuger 2001:57). She was aware of a significant moment in which she had a strong sense of the Divine presence, facilitating healing and giving her courage to take new action in her personal life. Because she now felt accepted by God, she saw spirituality as connection, as being in relationship with, which had an impact on and influenced her behaviour in a positive way. Images of God and self are very closely connected, and a change in the one brings about a change in the other (Fischer 1988:60). The emphasis was now on her own direct experiences of God, in contrast to being measured in terms of an external authority, that of her husband. God is no longer silent and remote to her. Instead God has become a companion and friend who travels with her and shares in her experiences. No longer only part of a belief system, God has now become part of her lived experience.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOUISE'S STORY IN THE CONTEXT OF A LITERATURE SURVEY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Louise's narrative is analysed within the framework of a postmodern epistemology and is significantly influenced by the dominant discourses of family life. Furthermore, the principles by which Louise has lived and organised her experiences have been radically challenged by the trauma of violence. Her story illustrates the problem facing those who have experienced violence and abuse, resulting in the victim's feeling personal guilt and shame, which in turn contributes to the difficulty of escaping from abusive situations.

5.2 NAMING ABUSE AND ITS EFFECTS

Louise's story of domestic and bodily violence confirms Fischer's (1988:135) contention that concerns centring around issues of power are among the most challenging ones women bring to pastoral care and counselling today. Although women feel distressed and angry about the abuse they suffer, they often experience a form of helplessness to do anything about it. Louise felt strongly that she 'knew' what to do, but lacked the ability to express herself or to persuade others to listen. The experience of powerlessness which resulted from her subordinate place in her home and immediate environment made Louise feel 'vulnerable and denigrated, treated as an object', as Gosney (1996:3) puts it. Imagining a different way of living was Louise's first step toward change, as described by Fischer (1988:126), but her story reveals that insight into such matters did not prove to be sufficient to bring about change.

Louise's story indicates that, even though she recognised personal and cultural patterns of thinking and acting as contributing to her unhappiness, she found it difficult to change established social structures or the personal patterns of a lifetime. This is what she dealt with when she began to confront the sources of her unhappiness. On a personal level, her integrity and happiness was dependent on her ability to exercise control over events, to be an agent regarding matters concerning her life (Fischer 1988:133). The domestic violence she suffered in the form of wife battering is an overt form of abuse. Not only did it make her feel worthless and used as a person, it 'restricted, limited and thwarted the exercise and realisation of her essential and effective freedom' (Russell 1996:21).

5.3 CULTURE – A TOOL OF DOMINATION?

The struggle against violence toward women has to place its analysis within its own culture, because, as long as cultures are patriarchal, female subordination and male domination are concealed rather than revealed in gender relations, by both men and women. Male domination in the family is often not labelled as such, because we may not regard the husband's power as stemming from a desire on his part to dominate. Patriarchal relations cannot be explained solely by the intentions, good or bad, of individual women and men. They exist in the social institutions and practices of society.

In telling her story, Louise discovered that her individual life appeared to have little meaning outside of the context of family history. In terms of their having lived with an abusive partner, her story of hardship and lack of power is strikingly similar to that of her mother, whose life was often at risk in her efforts to survive at the hands of a controlling and manipulating man. Her story also serves as a mirror of the many stories of other women on the margin, in patriarchal society, who struggle against violence in their personal lives, violence that is legitimised by both religion and the society in which we live. What discourses serve as the context for her narrative?

5.3.1 The construction of the family

Neuger (2001:121) states that intimate violence and its damage can only be understood by careful analysis of the culture in which it takes place, as well as by investigating the ways in which the abuse of women and children is rationalised. Louise's story is witness to a concept that many find difficult to understand, namely that the abuse she suffered in her growing years took place within the sanctuary of her family, and that the family is upheld by our culture as the institution providing a context that is supportive and nurturing. White (1995:93) writes that the popular myth that the family is 'the haven in a cruel world' and that discourses such as 'spare the rod and spoil the child' have contributed significantly to this 'mystification'. Hence, when women and children are abused in these contexts, they have difficulty distinguishing between abuse and nurturing, neglect and care, exploitation and love. Furthermore, Louise's story is witness to the pivotal role of the traditional family in social organization, and its capability of reproducing patriarchal social relations and constituting a primary site for the creation and continuation of violence, establishing some families as highly dangerous places for women and children.

5.3.2 Blaming the victim

White (1995:92) writes that women who have experienced abuse in childhood or adolescence may be involved in relationships in adult life in which they are subjected to further abuse by men. Not only do the extremely painful experiences of the physical violation of their bodies prevent them from speaking about the trauma, but those who have sought help often encounter a culture of disbelief, or the inference that the victim 'deserved' the abuse.

White adds that these discourses may involve pathological accounts of the woman victim's motive for entering into these relationships, often with debilitating consequences for the victims of abuse. Firstly, such interpretations encourage them to take responsibility for the abuse that is perpetrated by men, and secondly, they are encouraged to persevere in relationships in which they are being subjected to such violence. White states that the vulnerability with regard to leaving the abusive relationship is born out of difficulties these women have in discerning between relationships that are abusive and exploitative, and those that are nurturing, caring and supportive. Ackermann (1996b:143) writes that for those who live in circumstances of oppression and exploitation without freedom or material means, their lives often involve great risk in the struggle to survive. The risk is involved in believing that there may be a better future. It is clear how easily wrong interpretations can constitute patterns of living as being in the service of upholding the *status quo* (White 1995:92).

5.4 SITUATING THE SELF IN RELATIONSHIPS

Any form of abuse is fundamentally an assault on identity (Gosney 1996:4). White (1995:82) argues that women living within the framework of abuse develop a 'problem-saturated' self-description so that their interpretations of their experiences emphasise their worthlessness. Their experience of abuse, its effects and the way they make sense of it become a 'lens' through which the rest of their life experiences are viewed.

The self develops an identity strongly influenced by the relationships of which it has been part. Poling (1991:97) writes that the concept of a communal and relational self is constituted largely in terms of information passed on by others, both in the present and in the past, including what we have absorbed from others.

The abuse Louise suffered in her growing years was not just a distant memory, but a reality that was structured into her patterns of living and the way she related to others, constituting her ways of being in the world. Louise internalised the patterns of behaviour and emotion received from her parents. Her story tells of the hurt suffered because of the broken relationship between her mother and herself. Her experiences led to an array of confusing and destructive feelings which severely affected the way she perceived herself. She was emotionally very attached to her mother, because of the abuse suffered at the hands of her father. However, the fact that her mother had difficulty loving her and relating to her led to intense feelings of rejection. Furthermore, her experiences of domestic violence, coupled with the misuse of alcohol in the home, created conditions over which she had no control, causing her much distress. Feeling so betrayed by the people she loved made it difficult for her to trust others, especially men. She came to experience the world and relationships with others as radically unsafe. The beliefs she had about herself developed into a 'victim lifestyle' in adulthood, characterised by feelings of helplessness and passive behaviour (Adams-Westcott & Isenbart 1990:44), which made her vulnerable to being exploited in relationships.

Because the self is relational, it also internalises social attitudes (Poling 1991:96). Louise's story depicts her father as having entitlement over every person in the family, becoming enraged when this prerogative was challenged. She could not imagine her mother ever disagreeing with her father – he was always right. Louise was made to understand that her father (and therefore men in general) are autonomous and dominant, and that her mother (and thus women) were submissive. Her mother was devalued as a person because, in order to survive, she had to submit.

5.5 THE MIGRATION OF IDENTITY

As with so many women suffering abuse, Louise also at times felt she needed to get away to a place of safety for herself and her child, a place that would enable her to restructure her life, free from violence. She tells about her need for support as she sought to recover from the trauma of violence. Although she came to stop blaming herself for the abuse, she was constrained in breaking free, given her lack of employment skills, of economic power and of a meaningful support system of family and friends.

I came to understand better the complex issues involved in Louise's effort to leave the abusive situation when I read White's (1995:98) explanation of the concept of a 'migration of identity', a process during which victims of abuse are supported to leave and stay out of violent relationships. It is of the utmost importance that the victim comes to recognise that the

'abuse-dominated' identity is imposed by men who abuse, and that as part of the process of breaking free from the trauma they need to embark on a 'migration of identity', involving the rebuilding of a preferred sense of self. White (1995:98) states that victims are most vulnerable to feelings of desperation and fear during the migratory process, whilst establishing a new identity, which makes support from family and friends vital in order to prevent them from returning to an unchanged situation of violence.

Louise tells of many times she left her partner in the hope of escaping to a better life with her parents. Because circumstances in their home were far from satisfactory, she found herself in a 'trough', a situation which made her feel unwelcome and insecure with a sense of personal failure. White writes that this situation is often interpreted as 'I am worse off than before' and for many women it plays a significant role in their decision to return to abusive situations where nothing has changed.

5.6 THE MOTHERING DISCOURSE

Louise was asked by the headmaster of her son's school to seek therapeutic assistance for her son to address the problems he was causing. Because she was considered to be incapable of raising her son on her own, she was blamed for everything. Not only was she marginalised because of her positioning within patriarchal discourse as an unmarried mother, but also because of her concurring positioning in the discourse that suggests that 'a boy needs a father'. As language and discourse provide us with knowledge, the language of the dominant group determines the 'truth' of the discourse. Any persons who do not speak the language of the dominant discourse are not considered credible (Bons-Storm 1996:64). As a result, irrespective of what she did, Louise was devalued in comparison to other mothers; her mothering practices were rendered 'inappropriate' in relation to those of mothers who fitted the dominant ideology of a 'good' mother.

Weingarten (1995:11) states that discourses often have such a familiar nature that it can be difficult to distinguish the messages we are getting. The discourse 'he needs a father', suggests that mothers are incapable of raising a son alone. She adds that because many single mothers lack the necessary resources to conform to the societal ideal of a 'good' mother, their voices are often silenced or distorted.

Louise regarded therapy as a way to 'correct' the incompetent handling of her son. How the single mother is depicted, the images of who she is and what she needs to raise her son successfully become economic, social and political issues. The real issue at stake was the

fact that Louise, as a single parent, was seriously compromised in her ability to provide better resources for her son, coupled to the fact that the abuse they had already suffered was instrumental in the shaping of both their lives.

5.7 THE UNEMPOWERED EMPOWERED – A STORY OF HOPE

5.7.1 Spirituality, empowerment and healing

When we think differently about ourselves or we are able to construct new perceptions of our relationship to the world, we are empowered in the process; empowerment is centred in the ability to think differently about ourselves and the world around us.

Empowerment for Louise came in the telling of both the old and a new story. Before she could create a new and different story, filled with courage, wisdom and spiritual strength, she needed to understand the script of the dominant story by which she had lived, how it drew her in and how others positioned her within its terms. The metaphor of a spiritual journey was chosen with great sensitivity to honour the last part of her story in which her experiences of the Spirit become all-encompassing of her identity.

In the rites of passage analogy, the liminal phase is a period of transition. Louise entered this liminal phase upon her son's departure for the children's home. For her, entering this phase meant a shift away from known ways of thinking and patterns of interaction to experimentation with new thinking and behaviour. So many times before, she had left the abusive situation, only to return months later because of a lack of support from family and friends. She had acquired the status of a homeless person and she was now forced to look back on the road travelled thus far. For her, the crucial issue was that her child was leaving home not because she was a 'bad' mother, but because the situation was not conducive to growth and development in the home, due to circumstances largely beyond her control. Where would she go, what could she do that she had not tried before? She says: 'I grieved about the loss of Petrus, about my own life; it was all wrapped up in the most intense feelings of anger, guilt and loneliness'. Harris (1985:54) writes that mourning can be seen as a form of grieving over the absence of justice. Louise grieved because as a woman, justice had not been hers; she grieved for justice yet to be born.

For many women, mourning also signifies the beginning of speech, an 'unlearning to not speak' (Harris 1985:54). Metaphorically, she came to a place in her journey where she had to choose which road to travel; her situation and context confronted her to consider alternative

possibilities for belonging to the world, ways that were different from those she had experienced till then. Seeking any solution to keep her son at home and finding none, with no means to deny the pain she felt, Louise had no alternative but to work through the stages of mourning, where each step became a dwelling place where she was continually taught simply by entering that place. It is in witnessing the structure and all that is customary of everyday life collapsing that she began to know moments of transformation, something of herself that revealed alternative forms of identity.

‘Consciousness-changing is not accomplished by new discourses replacing old ones. It is accomplished as a result of the contradictions in our positionings, desires and practices – our subjectivities – which result from the co-existence of the old and new. Every relation and every practice to some extent articulates such contradictions and therefore is a site of potential change as much as it is a site of reproduction’ (Hollway, quoted in Davies 1992:74).

Being marginalised in society because of her position as an ‘unwed’ mother, Louise had little say when her son was asked to leave the school. She faced overwhelming odds. When her mothering skills were questioned, she did not have the power and knowledge to confront a male teacher hierarchy. It was in these moments of recollection that structure was given to the journey, endowing it with meaning which became a form of self-knowledge. Against the dominant voices from the school stood her own voice from within bringing to her awareness that ‘the bond between Petrus and me; it is all we have’ – they had something nobody could take away from them: ‘We suffered so much abuse, but managed to get through it, it made us stronger’. To reckon with her spiritual self required that she look both inward and outward, engaging her woundedness whilst seeking healing that could bring wholeness. This spiritual experience, serving as a lasting reference point, ‘going into the depths of things’ (Neumann 1992:199), helped her to accept her life as it was, seeing that what had happened to her life was not entirely her fault.

5.7.2 The process of reframing

The concept of reframing a story calls for a shift ‘in such a way that more authentic and life-giving truths emerge from the story than they did through its original framework of meaning’ (Neuger 2001:137).

Because of the stigma attached to children’s homes in our country (these homes often being considered places for the care of homeless or neglected children), Louise’s first visit was marked by feelings of rebuttal and doubt. The warm welcome and hospitality awaiting her

and Petrus on their arrival at the home contradicted the 'knowledges' about children's homes Louise had. Somehow, she was comforted by the thought that Petrus would be safe and well looked after – she now says: 'His housemother is a gift from heaven'. King (1996a:153) states that when we are able to recognise spirituality within the ordinariness of life, within our struggles, we are able to connect it to all our experiences, which can then be powerfully transformed and healed. Louise became comfortable with and acted upon new ideas, new assumptions, new ways of thinking that emerged from the transition stage.

This process of gaining clarity regarding matters affecting her life and that of her child moved alongside the process of her gaining a voice. In time the children's home proved to be a place of care, support and understanding for Petrus. By testing and exploring different alternatives, Petrus developed new ways of thinking and behaving. He excelled in his school work, bringing home merit certificates he had earned. He developed confidence in the new roles he was called on to play and developed knowledge and skills for the actions he wished to take for his life. For both Louise and Petrus, it involved 'a coming to new awareness – a transforming awareness – for the sake of empowering the self and reversing a culture that has been and continues to be toxic to many people' (Neuger 2001:137). The effect of their new ways of living and thinking has been felt and integrated into the very fabric of their lives; in his home town many attitudes and assumptions held in the community towards them have changed, assisting them in becoming reintegrated into society.

5.7.3 Spirituality and reconciliation

Brookfield (1987:62) writes that critical thinking, which may involve possibilities for taking action, arises when we are able to see our own situation, the problems we experience, as being connected to broader social forces instead of being due to the inadequacies of individual people.

For many years Louise struggled with the broken relationship between herself and her mother. She often wished they could talk things over in order to deal with the anger she felt. Not being able to express this anger directly, she felt that something in the relationship was incomplete. Although in later years she told herself that her mother was not worthy of her love, she could not move forward; the brokenness she felt in her heart kept her stuck in a recycling of pain. However, she also realised that it was not healthy to try to understand her anger by looking only at her own disappointment and hurt. Instead of blaming herself or her mother, she focused on changing the pattern of the relationship between them.

Griffith and Griffith (2002:132) state that a change in the relationship between the individual and God also strengthens changes in relationships with friends or family members. Furthermore, McFague (quoted in Vogel 1996:197) suggests that the source for reconciliation is the 'healing' power that comes from God, the lover of the world. In writing the mother's day card, in the words carefully chosen not to offend, Louise invited God into her human experience, in order to know how to make the appropriate response. She recalls: 'sending the card was for me, in a way, putting the past behind me'. By using this approach, she managed to channel the energy of the anger she felt into spiritual growth and creative action.

5.7.4 Abusive circumstances transformed and healed

After many years of alcohol abuse and the violence it occasioned, Louise's husband gave up alcohol completely. Louise acknowledged that it was difficult for her to explain. She saw this change as coming from God and believed that He was instrumental in the healing of their relationship. Being free from the abuse of alcohol provided a new dimension in their relationship which brought about possibilities for change, enabling her to move from a situation of victimisation and violence to a vision of strength and empowerment.

For feminist theologians, relational empowerment is simultaneously a divine and human process which strengthens both Creator and creature (Heyward 1996:52). Moreover, this power is not only *from* God; it *is* God and therefore can be termed sacred (Heyward 1996:52). One-way power relations establish power as status or privilege, whereas a relational process involves transformation in which people experience themselves as open, growing and changing in and through their relationships.

Fischer (1988:163) writes that the process of healing the wounds of violence is synonymous with a resurrection experience; that although the wounds remain, they can be transformed into a new kind of wholeness as a woman discovers new strengths within herself and her relationships. Grounded in her own spiritual development and striving to have a richer life before God, Louise was able to connect with that which was valuable to her in her partner, at the same time resisting and challenging his oppressive attitudes and behaviour. She came to understand that life is not free of inequalities, but that within a relationship of mutuality where power is shared and influence is mutual, inequalities need not become injustices (Fischer 1988:138).

Non-violence in relationships involves concepts of power and empowerment (Fischer 1988:169), with power as a form of 'personal' power as opposed to power-over-others (Meyerding 1982:11). The relational power Louise sought encompassed ways of receiving as well as giving, focusing on both speaking and listening as aesthetic aspects of a relationship. This form of relational power in non-violent situations leads to agreement rather than opposition (Fischer 1988:38). Feminist writers have warned that the word 'non-violent' should not be confused with false assumptions of surrender and passivity, and that the notion 'not-violent' should be seen as only a small part of its meaning. In discovering her own personal power, greater wholeness was fostered for Louise, because she was empowered to choose between leaving or changing an abusive 'personal' situation. Louise thus became better able (stronger in her ability) to continuously resist forms of degradation and abuse, rather than being helped out of an abusive situation, but left with no increase in personal power (Meyerding 1982:11).

5.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The first stories shared by Diana and Louise recognized deprivation and disappointment, the latter stories fashion hope through grace and changed lives.

Therapists have been curious as to what influences bring about the changes that occur in the lives of people (Griffith & Griffith 2002:134). Judging by the stories the participants shared, the addition of new language to the 'repertoire of words' and ideas available to them for establishing relationships and determining the role of subjective experiences or embodiment in opening up novel possibilities for living were significant in shaping alternative stories about their lives (Griffith & Griffith 2002:134). It has further been understood that perplexity in relationships sometimes can be resolved by adding a new voice (new language) to the old conversation in which the problem had been maintained (Griffith & Griffith 2002:117).

The conversation between Diana and her husband became old and stagnant and devalued her as a person, and it also had an impact on her relationship with God, because as long as she felt punished, she heard only God's silence. Griffith and Griffith (2002:123) state that a thinly characterized personal God is one attribute of a lifeless person-God dialogue. In her subsequent story Diana shared the conversation with her pastor, during which they engaged in meaningful dialogue through which she felt heard and understood. The conversation, wrapped in new language, produced fresh metaphors and ideas about God and about herself. When she began to relate to the new experiences, the person-God conversation became dialogical rather than monological, providing creativity in solving life's problems.

Louise's story of spiritual strength runs counter to her story of abuse and helplessness. When her husband gave up alcohol, her alternative story reached new dimensions captivating the expansiveness in God's nature, introducing new thinking about God through language consistent with new events in her life. New experiences replaced old ones that served to constrict her, and although positions of earlier helplessness were valid in so far as they were real to her; the alternative story of being sustained by an ever-present God provided her with new 'tools' with which to strengthen her relationship with her partner. This discovery granted self-definition as a person, helping her to act effectively, thereby opening up possibilities for her to resolve the discord in her marriage.

CHAPTER SIX

ON WRITING OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES – SELF-ANALYSING REFLECTIONS

A soul met an angel and asked:
By which path shall I reach heaven quickest –
The path of *knowledge* or the path of *love*?
The angel looked wonderingly and said
Are not both paths one?

Olive Schreiner (quoted in Barrett 1999:193)

6.1 REFLECTING ON THE AIMS OF THE PROJECT

6.1.1 Deconstructing spirituality

'For many people spirituality is a soft word, something idealistic and dreamy, even sugary, like icing on a cake' (King 1996a:152). For some, spirituality is sometimes described and understood as if it was only a private and internal endeavour, 'me and God', separated from the socio-economic, political context which provides it with substance (Perry & Rolland 1999:275). As transpired in the research process, spirituality unfolded as connection, being open to the transcendent dimension of life, present in ordinary everyday activity, thereby enabling the participants to heal from trauma and abuse. Diana and Louise have shared stories of spirituality as something 'hidden in the soul' (Perry & Rolland 1999:276) and as something that which connects one to all there is (Griffith & Griffith 2002:219), embracing a sense of meaning and wholeness.

A theme common to many discussions of critical thinking is that this activity usually results from people having experienced trauma or tragedy in their lives (Brookfield 1987:6). The stories told by Diana and Louise reveal how their experiences of abuse, the world and their place in it caused them to question previously trusted assumptions. Through self-reflection they took time out to get to know the contexts that restricted and limited them. This called for a step 'outside the given', a turning inward, finding themselves in an effort to reclaim the self and integrating knowledge that they felt subjectively and discerned as important with knowledge they had gained from others (Belenky et al 1986:124). Whilst acquiring knowledge of how to deal with many issues in their lives, they were also changing at a deeper level, in a sense regaining the essential quality of who they were. The process of change tapped into their spiritual wellsprings, nurturing a new sense of self. It made them

view the world and their place within it differently. It aroused a desire not only to feel different but to be someone different. Their stories indicated that spirituality in essence opened up possibilities for them to become *other* than who they had believed themselves to be, allowing them to move beyond their sense of despair.

In our effort to deconstruct spirituality, we engaged with the themes of love and knowledge which we believed were involved in nurturing an enabling spirituality. This spirituality was reflected in the degree of importance Louise and Diana gave to events in their lives, thereby shaping their character and outlook on life. 'When "truth" is seen as a process of construction in which the knower participates, a passion for learning is unleashed' (Belenky et al 1986:140), shaping 'personal knowledge' as 'the passionate participation of the knower in the act of knowing' (Polanyi, quoted in Belenky et al 1986:141). Both Louise and Diana were ambitious and striving to find their voices, thereby giving expression to what they knew and cared about. Each wanted her voice and action to make a difference to other people and the world.

Louise made positive changes with regard to the way in which she worked on those relationships most important to her. She was no longer answering violence with violence, but chose to resist abuse by focusing on improving conditions to create a better home for her son. Having left an abusive relationship, Diana became determined to give her children a better future; she sensed how her interaction with her children had changed, from frustration and irritability, to gentleness and understanding. These choices resonate with the observations of Ruddick (quoted in Belenky et al 1986:142), who suggests that a true 'conversion' involves rethinking and refeeling, a growth of passionate knowing. For Diana, feeling accepted and loved by her in-laws helped to restore her own sense of value and power.

Through their stories Diana and Louise also provide an overview of the importance and diversity of religion and spirituality. Their stories emphasise the notion that religion and spirituality are not things that grow and develop as answers to abstract questions; rather, they are responses to what we experience (Ochs 1983:13). Langer (2000:42) explains this further when he states that a person may live prudently by a religious code, but that his/her life may be spiritually barren. Also, a person may not be religious at all, but may be deeply spiritual. Spiritual growth involves attentive, intentional transformation of the self to bring it into a closer relationship with reality (Ochs 1983:10). For Diana and Louise, this conscious awareness of their own experiences brought about very different spiritual insights, stressing the uniqueness of every person's spiritual journey. Their stories also indicate that religious

statements can only be understood in terms of people's own lives and that the truth of these statements must be tested against experience (Ochs 1983:140). Also, if the primary component of spirituality, the transformation of the self, is neglected, the spiritual quest is obstructed (Ochs 1983:11). Their stories also suggest that not all forms of spirituality enhance human wholeness; distinctions need to be made between healthy and unhealthy religious beliefs and practices if one is to take spirituality seriously. Diana's story illustrates how religion has the potential to become destructive. This is in accord with the writings of Ochs (1983:25), who states that if experiences are not taken seriously and given a place in reality construction, people may stop having such experiences and thereby lose something of life, or become estranged from their experiences, resulting in a life that is lived 'unauthentically'. Moore (quoted in Walsh 1999:7) contends that the 'loss of soul' has been the primary source of human afflictions, and that a deficit in the human spirit 'appears symptomatically in obsessions and addictions, violence and loss of meaning'.

6.1.2 Reconstructing women's spirituality

Kolbenschlag (1982:60) argues that 'women are discovering that spirituality is authentic when it is intrinsically subjective, when it is brought forth from the womb of their own experience'. This is perhaps what other writers describe as an embodied spirituality 'linking the earth and sky' (Moore, quoted in Walsh 1999:7), providing people with a meaning-making frame informed by a relationship with the Divine in life. Listening to the stories of Louise and Diana, we conclude that as they became more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, in the form of 'the small voice within', they found an inner source of strength. Belenky et al (1986:54) state that the growing reliance on intuitive processes becomes an essential component in the service of self-protection and self-definition of women.

The stories shared by the participants indicate that their spirituality is not something abstract and divorced from life, practised in isolation, but rather something they can *touch* and be *in touch with* (King 1996a:152). Through their spirituality they seek wholeness and an integration of their personal and social experiences. This view stands in direct contrast to the traditional perspective of spirituality which is dualistic, separating men from women and individuals from the world.

Walsh (1999:21) maintains that religion and spirituality are expected to grow over the coming decades, shaped less by institutions and more by people who are seeking meaning. The voices of Louise and Diana are in conversation with the many voices of Christian women,

telling the story of how women of today do theology in a new way. Authors of the western spiritual tradition have given little consideration to the experiences of women (Ochs 1983:3). What women contribute to traditional spirituality is their experiences – of living in the world as women – it is a spirituality formulated through the insights gained and growing out of these experiences. Diana and Louise have reflected on what they have experienced and felt subjectively, each bringing a unique perspective to spiritual questions based on experiences that were unique to them. Being in relationship with these experiences and what is felt is the beginning of spirituality (Ochs 1983:9).

Spirituality is therefore not only a way of knowing, but also a way of being and doing. Whereas traditional spirituality suggests a turning away from this world, in their stories Louise and Diana emphasise a spirituality within the ordinariness and struggles of life, allowing them to connect to all experiences, even those which are damaging. For them their spirituality is open-ended, involving a quest to become more fully human. In direct contrast to a view of traditional spirituality which focuses on the individual self and personal inwardness, their spirituality proclaims a transformation of both their inner and inter-actional worlds. If the goal of traditional spirituality is individual salvation, understood to lie ultimately in union with God, it also depends where we locate God (Ochs 1983:24). The stories of Louise and Diana do not speak of a God outside or above this world – they share experiences of God's grace in the form of domestic sacraments which have been relational and transforming for them (Jones 1996:40). Recognising this power in the 'Other', we recognise the sacredness of their being, understanding God as creative energy and life-giving power of Being (McBride 1996:183). The power 'to be' is a sacred right every human being has, (McBride 1996:183) symbolising human communion with the nurturing Spirit that sustains the rhythm of life.

King (1996a:154) argues that spirituality is more than a struggle to survive. It is found also in the effort to live a fuller, more abundant and richer life, what King calls the 'very bread of life'. Although all spirituality is grounded in our experiences of reality, it is linked to a belief that there is a greater, fuller reality which calls us and in which we participate (King 1996a:153). It becomes 'an attempt to grow in sensitivity to self, to others, to non-human creation and to God who is within and beyond this totality' (King 1996a:153).

For both Diana and Louise, their spirituality was not reliant on others for its cultivation; it developed rather through their quest for human dignity and personhood amidst abusive circumstances. Their stories reveal that their spiritual journeys are also not separate from the everyday world, but are in the world and of the world, the daily activities of family living which allow them to connect spiritually to all their life experiences. Women's contribution to

spirituality is all-encompassing – it speaks of being in relationship, suggesting that full human maturity involves being aware of the interconnectedness of all forms of life (Ochs 1983:10). In the context of family experiences, it is a sense of godliness that turned them from a preoccupation with self to actively seeking the meaning or good in life. In their stories they focused on beautiful and sacred encounters as these unfolded, and in their remembering they not only overcame spiritual isolation, but developed a resource of spiritual strength they could continuously draw on. Ochs (1983:119) writes about this as a spiritual walk, metaphorically, as ascending a spiritual mountain, not with the goal of conquering the mountain summit, but rather with a desire to know fully what we find there, an indwelling reality, compatible with every experience.

6.1.3 Discovering/recovering an empowering/healing spirituality for women

Spiritual empowerment is synonymous with what Harris (1988:14) terms an engagement in a connective process that embodies both 'stance and dance'. It plays itself out in a rhythm, inviting knowledge whilst exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting, developing freedom and independence. Terms such as personal agency and empowerment are synonymous to 'healing and love as it appears to be indirectly assumed as part of a process of reclaiming one's voice, of using language to reconstruct one's new sense of self' (Epston et al, quoted in Damianakis 2001:32). Empowerment was evident in the way they managed to rise above adversity and to seek integrity and justice for themselves and their children (Doherty 1999:160). It is a process which enabled them to feel more in control of their lives, constantly working to enlarge their sense of personal identity, seeking quality in relationships with others, thereby improving their overall sense of well-being (Heyward 1996:52). It becomes 'a relational process involving not only humans but all members of creation and the sacred energy that connects us' (McFague, quoted in Heyward 1996:53).

Various counsellors and therapists have given credence to the healing capacity of the telling and retelling of stories because of the redemptive power intrinsic for the storyteller (Frank 1995:24). It has been suggested that in the telling of the story, hope is occasioned that things can be different, that change is brought about when people reflect on attitudes about themselves and their lives; 'when humans move from a passive acceptance of ourselves as created, dependent beings into an understanding of ourselves as creative, interrelated creatures' (Heyward, quoted in Tatman 1996:198). It suggests that it is through communication at intuitive and creative levels that we are able to more fully experience ourselves in our world and that healing comes through reflection and expression. 'We are creating the world at the same time we think about it' (Belenky et al 1986:132). The

possibility of 'reframing' what we see, within the enfolding story, merges story-telling with 'spirituality telling' (Muldoon & King 1995:343) in which participants incorporate both the struggles and achievements of their lives in terms of what they embrace as ultimate merit and purpose. Kitch (1990:83) writes that it is through narrative that God is able to structure a relationship with us in the form of an ongoing story, connecting our living with eternity. In the context of the research project, an awareness of the profound influence of Diana and Louise's core beliefs created a form of spirituality which helped and sustained them in their choice to embrace life, 'to affirm and trust life and to recognise the energy and power of God's Spirit in all movements of life' (King 1996a:151).

In the telling and retelling of the research stories, it transpired that it was difficult to talk about abuse and suffering without talking about hope and spirituality. The themes of risk, hope and struggle and their connection to spirituality is expressed by Ackermann (1996b:142), who states that often the determination to survive is coupled to hope, involving risk and challenge. She claims this hope as a gift of the human spirit, a form of resistance in its refusal to accept defeat. Furthermore, this hope is to be lived if we want our hopes to happen. Our project enabled the participants to revisit, re-engage and rework earlier personal stories to liberate their spirituality, so that within the framework of abuse and suffering, the more hopeful aspects of their lives surfaced and were given meaning. Through the stories of suffering we were invited into the spiritual realm, thereby creating an environment in which healing and empowerment could occur as the spiritual stories became stronger, positioning them not as victims but as actors in their own lives. Their experiences of healing and growth were profoundly spiritual in nature, so that for both Diana and Louise the ability to face the future rested on the strength and security they discovered within themselves.

Diana's story reveals how, where once she felt disempowered and isolated, she has experienced a new-found strength when she found God in a new way. As she sought to become more engaged in the spiritual, she managed to discern false images and beliefs that were destructive rather than life-giving. She became more spirited and alive and less diminished as a person. Together with finding her own inner power, she sensed the transformation of her identity, a change into a more enduring sense of self. These changes could be noticed in her interaction with her children and those around her, as well as in her decision to act on her desire to improve her education. Her spiritual regeneration became a way of life and a way of being in the world.

Louise, having known violence and abuse both as a child and into her adult years, speaks of her spirituality as a 'way of life itself' (Russell 1996:21) and believes that she could never

have made it if God was not with her. The belief that He was with her was all she had in her 'search for integrity and meaning in her constant struggle to resist dehumanization' (Russell 1996:21). Her spirituality grew in her resistance, resisting all that abuse and violence wanted her to believe about herself, empowering her in the process with strength to succeed. To enter into the struggle of life as she did required not just endurance, but the strength to make meaningful choices that would enhance her life and that of her son.

6.1.4 Using a healing spirituality to address abusive circumstances

In the past, before therapy gained professional status, people turned to spiritual writings, teachings and practices when they sought help with their problems. Whilst some of these teachings may actually entrench patriarchal notions and other potentially harmful ways of seeing, the fact that many of these teachings still exist signifies the importance that people give to these practices in times of need, affirming also the capacity human beings have for resilience when faced with problems (Wolin et al 1999:121). The process of healing suggests becoming whole as a person, recovering from woundedness, whilst 'healing from trauma also constitutes a quest for spirituality' (Barrett 1999:195). 'Being healed is seen as the restoration of the right relationship between God and humanity which in turn secures a person's position in society' (Bouwes 1996:92). Reflecting upon their lives, Louise and Diana regarded adversity and suffering as having opened them up more fully to the spiritual realm. Their stories revealed their trust in a personal God who would be a source of strength through difficult times. Experiencing His love, a form of 'incompressibility' developed which became transformative in many areas of their lives.

Louise's story reveals the healing that took place through the hardship she endured when her son left for the children's home. She needed much courage to question constraining beliefs and destructive actions in order to learn from previous mistakes. Having felt the pain and emotion of intense soul-searching, the fact that her husband gave up alcohol was, for her, almost a resurrection experience. This event dramatically altered their lives. She came to believe that God performed miracles. She believed that He was part of the decision-making process in her choice to allow her son to leave for the children's home. These intense spiritual happenings helped her to meet challenges with much more confidence. She accepted the children's home as necessary in the process of healing, so they could all value connection and growth in and of themselves, strengthening meaningful personal and spiritual bonds. Furthermore, she sought reconciliation in her efforts to heal the wounded relationship between herself and her mother, something that had been too hurtful to discuss for many years.

Brueggemann (quoted in Perry & Rolland 1999:274), a theologian, describes hope as ‘the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion’, something which offers a ‘promissory call to a new future’. This is evident when Diana reflects on her life, implying that healing and a sense of liberation was hers when she asked critical questions about previously held values, accepted ideas and behaviours. As she abandoned assumptions that had been inhibiting her development and worth as a person, she realised that she had the power to change certain situations in her life. Away from her husband and not wanting to reject her faith, she sought Christian values that would make her life more meaningful. Integrating new images into her spiritual life by thinking about God in new ways, her imagination was freed from the limitations of a language dominated by male images, bringing about new possibilities for her spiritual life, in accord with what Fischer (1988:69) says. Through reflection and prayer she managed to develop her experiences of spiritual connection, a resource from which she drew and which became the chief source contradicting social and religious narratives which marginalised her as a less valuable member of society.

Having decided on the worth of her new ways of thinking and living, Diana began to integrate these into her life. This involved the exploration of ideas and activities previously thought to be impossible. Resisting her fears that she could never be anyone other than a housewife and mother, she enrolled for an advanced course in computing. As she managed to complete sections of the work successfully, much healing took place, brought about by an increase in self-confidence as the task prompted her to take action in other areas of her life. The learning was not only work-related; she also learned about herself, creatively changing not just the ideas she had about her own ability, but also shaping her outlook to life. This highlights the importance of ‘agency’ – the sense that each of us can play a part in choosing what we consider to be preferred ways of living in different circumstances, based on the evaluation of our experiences (Zimmerman & Dickenson 1996:93). The advantage of having been able to name the problems in her life assisted her in experiencing her own personal power in creating more of what she preferred.

6.2 REFLECTING ON THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS

I have always enjoyed listening to people's stories and reading descriptive writing; and the art of creative writing is also something which has always captivated me. Through qualitative research I have been granted the privilege of listening to the stories people tell and of writing about these sacred encounters. I have become more conscious of the power of language, how the spoken word becomes 'real' once written, something which has involved me in constantly seeking to improve the way I speak and write. Through the research and my work with two women who have been marginalised, I have grown as much as the participants, feeling more connected within myself and in relation to others.

However, I discovered that qualitative research is not just about listening to stories and giving a factual account of these. This field of research is fraught with ethical dilemmas (Bar-On 1996:20), because as researchers we work with the lives of *real* people. How could it not be complicated? Who is going to judge what serves the interests of the participants best and who is able to decide on the integrity of social action, on ethical dilemmas which Price (1996:212) refers to as 'snakes in the swamp'. When I started with the project, I was extremely anxious and unsure of myself; if research ever called for flight, I wondered if my wings could get me off the ground!

In the prologue to the research stories, I set out to describe the research process and stressed how important I believed my relationship with the participants to be. Because of previous projects in which the research participants and I had been involved, we fortunately enjoyed a sense of rapport which had developed over time because of our shared interests. However, 'intimate relations as methodological criterion' (Reinharz 1992:265) cannot guarantee 'ethically pure' research; on the contrary, I was often reminded of the words of Goolishian (quoted in Andersen 1993:308), that 'you should not be too worried about what you should do, rather, what you should *not* do'.

The work focused on subordinated women who were experiencing financial hardship, had limited educational qualifications and had suffered abuse, both physical and emotional, from childhood. They were the 'other', marginalised and oppressed, and I set out to write their stories of abuse and of hope. Despite previous interactions between myself and the participants, I did not know many of the details of their stories. From the start of the research project, I had to face the difficult issue of listening to their stories of pain and trauma. I could not have predicted this and the effect on me ahead of time; I had to deal with these effects as

their stories unfolded (Bar-On 1996:11). Looking back, I am unsure whether I was prepared for the sorrow and distress I was to witness.

I left some meetings with a knot in my stomach. For days afterwards I found myself still reflecting on our conversations. I mentioned to my supervisor that although I was excited at the prospect of doing research, I found the stories of abuse hard to listen to. I felt the strain as I tried to transcribe their stories, omitting certain events I found difficult to write about without offending the reader. At times I became unsure whether these parts of the story were in fact unnecessary to the reader's understanding or whether omitting these details was simply my way of minimising the pain I felt. Yet, throughout the process, Louise and Diana never made me feel that it was difficult for them to share these intensely personal moments with me. Sometimes I wondered if I could be true to the meaning of their words; would I be able to do justice to their stories? Would I at all times be able to merit their trust? Would I be able to make their voices heard, and above all, would I be worthy of hearing and writing about their lives?

Katz (quoted in Ellis & Flaherty 1992:1) argues that little attention has been given to research on subjective experiences because researchers feel 'repelled or threatened by the unruly content'. I was haunted by many questions as to the value of this research, how far was it ethically appropriate to go with the participants without invading their 'private' worlds, what was expected of me and where such research would take me. It was hard to consider my engagement in this work as merely a connection between myself and the research. I developed a greater capacity for trustworthiness and commitment to the research and the participants and found myself being changed ever more richly through the process (Miller 1996:145).

As the research process unfolded, I realised that no research can be neutral or value-free, and that qualitative research is in essence an ethically complex undertaking. No matter how amiable and sympathetic my interaction with the participants, I was still very much involved in the 'weaving' of their life stories; and using these stories to support or refute a theory will always be intrusive (Lieblich 1996:174). With this in mind, I was invariably aware that it was not the end product, but the entire research process, that shaped the qualitative inquiry; particularly the interplay of the self and the other, which could, if I did not guard against it, become exploitative.

Doing qualitative research not only involves us in the lives of real people, but it also raises the issue of how we go about protecting other human lives, also throwing light on the type of

society we wish to create in our day-to-day dealings with people. 'We reflect on our lived experiences and we have a relationship to our experiences and reflections. Meaning and value reside not simply in life which is lived but in our relationship to life' (Ochs 1983:10). Likewise, the meaning of qualitative research is not inherent in the research – it lies in the relationship between researcher and researched. 'Each benefits by the interaction. Each has the opportunity to be heard with lives becoming enriched – from mutual exploration of perspective and truth' (Miller 1996:135). The process of coming into this relationship is profoundly spiritual and the research process was guided by a moving both inward and outward towards self and other as an expression of this spirituality.

At the start of the project, the participants were asked what they hoped to benefit from our discussions. Both expressed a wish to gain self-knowledge and to become stronger. They sought the support of collaborative interaction and felt that they had much to share since our earlier interactions. I discovered their eagerness to be heard – to have their stories listened to by a mindful other (Miller 1996:131). We spoke in general terms about how the publication of their stories could be helpful to other women, as suggested by Chase (1996:46).

We spoke about 'knowledges' that silence us and how these could be countered. The research process afforded them the opportunity to explore themselves, to increase self-awareness and to find meaning, helping to enhance identity through the building of meaningful relationships and respectful dialogue. Furthermore, they were given an opportunity to voice their concerns and to have these explored and heard, as well as to qualify every written piece. At the end of the process, I feel confident that the necessary steps were taken to ensure that the research process was inherently ethical (Josselson 1996:133).

6.3 CONSEQUENCES TO THE SELF THROUGH THE RESEARCH PROCESS

I have identified the following ways in which my experiences with the other enhanced self-reflection and learning.

Through intensely felt moments when we shared the trauma of abuse, I became more insightful of the pain suffered by the victims. The 'unspeakable' nature of abuse stared out at me, how self-respect often caused abuse to 'remain behind closed doors', away from the eyes and ears of uncaring neighbourhoods. This had a transformative effect on my life when I compared myself with the participants: they had relatively little in life, yet their strength and resilience far outweighed my own. 'Merely' doing what had to be done each day, they

counted their actions as no great spiritual accomplishment, their spiritual development gracefully unfolding without pride or strain.

How does one know that one's own views regarding spirituality and religion have not become fundamentalist? It is only by learning from the other that I have come to realise that it takes considerable emotional strength and courage to admit that my own familiar explanations might need to be rethought and revised. Gilmour (1992:554) writes that diverse spiritual narratives become a lens through which to view one's own spirituality, as diversity focuses attention back to one's own spiritual tradition. I have become far more sensitive and respectful to other people's positioning with regard to religion and spirituality; I have a greater awareness of the potential dangers of fundamentalist and dogmatic views and practices that can harm others. In order to be more sensitive to the lived experiences of people I have had to learn the complicated skills of how to listen, how to comfort, how to voice my doubts and criticisms while preserving self-respect, and how to communicate as fully and clearly as possible. To quote Miller (1996:145), there 'was a taking in of their ideas, being changed by their ideas. It was as if though each exchange of emotion, idea or perspective added fertiliser to seeds of thought and feeling that had been lying dormant in me'. To look critically at assumptions by which we live is not an easy task, neither cognitively nor emotionally, and it can only happen in situations where we are able to share openly from a position of equality, a situation which focuses attention on and unmask the 'expert' role of counsellors and therapists.

I believe that I am now better able to enter someone else's frame of reference in order to see situations and look at them more clearly from the other's point of view, and that I am less likely to be judgmental. I am now more attuned to lived experiences subjectively felt by the other; something which was both humbling and enriching. This has affected my eagerness to know myself and others in different ways. It takes willingness to practise the art of respectful listening and to speak from a less dominant position (Richardson 1992:135). With much of this baggage shifted, the research process has enabled me to journey more easily to the other's world. I have become more respectful, more thoughtful, about what 'doing' research means (Richardson 1992:135).

6.4 THE RESEARCH JOURNEY AND ITS EFFECT ON THE LIVES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Before considering in detail what was learned along the way, I wish to reflect on my question to the participants as to their feelings and emotions when reading the printed versions of our conversations.

I mentioned earlier my own discomfort transcribing the research conversations and committing the lives of the participants to print. Providing them with the transcribed versions of their stories was for me more difficult than listening to their stories in conversation (Josselson 1996:64). I was cautious that the printed stories should not in any way detract from the 'true' story, that the story was informed by the facts and not by my sense of what the facts should be (Webster 1996:193), yet I could not help feeling in control of the written text. I felt anxious and uncertain as to what to expect when I gave them their stories to read because 'to re-narrate a life unmasked, robs the other of a piece of his or her freedom no matter how exhilarating an experience it may be' (Josselson 1996:67).

Louise had difficulty reading about the family violence and trauma she suffered in her growing years and the wounded relationship between herself and her mother. Old memories were relived, reminders of the interaction and inferences that belonged to her family life and relationships which had never really been discussed before. Cautious not to re-traumatise her in any way, I listened carefully and critically to which experiences she wished to have presented in story form, what areas made her feel vulnerable and which details she wanted me to exclude. I came to appreciate that events shared willingly in the telling of the story are not necessarily what the storyteller wishes to see in print, placing the researcher under greater responsibility in terms of what is presented and especially in terms of commitment to the participants. It is hard to face these issues without feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable. However, I believe these experiences and the process of self-reflection have led to my own development and growth, something most valuable in doing this kind of research.

I remember an initial meeting with the participants, discussing the aims and purposes of the project, co-ownership, the structuring of meetings and what they hoped to gain from the project themselves. This initial meeting was summarised in letter form and first sent to my supervisor for perusal and comment. Whilst we were waiting for his reply, both Louise and Diana grew extremely anxious to start. However, when I received the letters back and gave them insight into the comments received from my supervisor, emphasising my ethical

responsibility towards them, I was touched when both participants remarked that they felt honoured in having the final say, and that nobody had ever made them feel so 'special' before.

The participants seemed to use our conversations and the way in which these provided opportunities to story their experience as a way of also examining their lives, of understanding their experiences better and of organising them (Miller 1996:142). The narrative process assisted them in re-authoring their lives, with experience and story communicating with each other so that the meaning contained in the story became refined and enriched (Miller 1996:143). When I asked them to reflect on the journey we had taken together, they commented in different ways.

Louise commented: 'If I look back now, I am so grateful for what you did for Petrus and me, for all of us; I can never say thank you enough. These times we have had together helped me to gain greater insight about myself and my relationships; helped me to see things in a new perspective and I am sure the knowledge I gained will help me in the future'.

She added: 'What I found especially helpful was our discussion around the construction of identities; I never looked at it in this way. Whenever I entered a room with unfamiliar people, I would suddenly feel "self-conscious", overwhelmed with feelings of low self-esteem, something which created an enormous obstacle to my perception of how other people viewed me. This caused me much pain, loneliness and disappointment, and I was unaware that it was my concept of self that occasioned these situations. These thoughts I had about myself stood in the way of easy conversation with other people so I could not be myself. The light went on for me when you said: "But if you are all strangers to each other how would they know anything about you?" Through our discussions I came to understand that the constricting frame of reference I had about myself came from the contexts within which it was formulated. Kosie constructed a particular type of world for me, a world in which the violence I suffered and the language he used made me believe that everything was my fault, that I deserved the abuse and was useless. Once I was able to free myself from this, it brought so much relief. I am no longer frightened and fearful when I meet with strangers, aware that in our interaction I am also constantly creating and co-constructing ideas with them about myself. It has helped me to free myself from much self-blame and made communication with others much easier.

Something else I also found useful was the fact that although I was initially cautious to share my life of violence and abuse, I saw myself in a different way after hearing Diana's story. It

strengthened me knowing that I was not suffering the way I have because I was to blame, and that other people were also struggling with abuse, albeit of a different kind. In listening to her story there was much I could relate to, especially the powerlessness often experienced by women in society today. I learned a lot about myself, and how through our stories we support and bring about healing for each other as new information, new ideas about ourselves and our relationships develop. Our conversations helped me to reflect, for me it was an opportunity to examine my life and interests, also to think about the value of friendship. I wish I could learn more'.

Diana commented: 'I have enjoyed our meetings very much. Firstly, having left my husband has caused much loneliness which made me really look forward to our time together. Secondly, during our meetings I was always aware of the caring atmosphere; I felt heard and understood, something I so often longed for in my life. In the telling of my story so many issues surfaced again. I became aware how difficult it has been for my husband to try and understand other people's arguments and beliefs from the standpoint of their perceptions. I have become aware of the fact that good relationships are essential to an understanding of ourselves as people, yet the patterns of dominance and submission can easily become etched into the ground rules of relationships.

You (Joan) have helped me a lot previously, already then our contact meant a great deal to me. However, circumstances just made me fall back again. I have never realised just how dominating my husband had been; I never had a say. Our sessions brought much healing – I am a new person, far more positive than I was ever before. Our conversations helped me to consciously think about my life. Things made more sense as I heard myself talking and paying attention to that which I really want. I am able to embrace life more fully now. I paint and bake and do things creatively, knowing that he is not there to take it all out of my hands. Our meetings made me aware again of God's faithfulness, because I had time to reflect on what this relationship has meant for me in recent months. I want to bring up my children in line with what the Bible teaches; I pray that I will be able to see life through their eyes. I pray a lot for my children and I know God is walking this road with me. I pray that in the future I will be even more free, that my children will notice the change in me. I still have much hurt to work through but I believe that time will bring the healing I need'.

6.5 THE EFFORT TO CREATE SOCIAL CHANGE

6.5.1 Consciousness-raising about specific policies and their effect on people's lives

Before becoming engaged in the research process, I was a student with the Institute for Therapeutic Development. As part of my training programme, I rendered therapeutic assistance to Louise's son, Petrus. Having embarked specifically on the issue of raising an awareness in the community and at the school about their circumstances, I believe the process offered an opportunity for myself and everyone involved to re-assess the possibilities of a different future for Petrus and the meaning of connectedness in community.

I was approached by the local high school to assist Petrus with the problems he was experiencing. In view of the headmaster and teachers' not understanding a postmodern epistemology and narrative ways of working, I can say that my training in therapeutic practices allowed me to see 'familiar' sites (such as the school and its hierarchical arrangement of teachers and pupils) in new ways. Although I was involved with one pupil only, I believe my work has changed many perspectives, not only of the school authorities, but also viewpoints held by many in our community and this change has been the source of much hope and encouragement for me.

I believe that my involvement with Petrus encouraged our community to view single parenting with much more empathy, as well as to re-evaluate criteria by which the lives of both Louise and her son were socially constructed along culturally specific determined lines. As a result of Petrus's leaving the school, I was invited to address the School Board and was able to provide them with 'new knowledges' about Louise and her son, information about how the 'problem' was fed and maintained through interaction at school, at home and in society.

We reflected on the multiple files covering only his 'bad' behaviour, these having followed him from one school to the next. The 'problem file' spoke on his behalf and became inherent to his socially constructed identity, gaining momentum as it placed Petrus constantly 'under the spotlight'. A dramatic example of speaking from the position of the other (in this case Louise and her son), was in the ability to touch the listeners emotionally, in being able to problematise interpretative practices (strict record keeping of his 'bad' behaviour) and providing a different perspective on single, unmarried mothers. This resulted in the headmaster's inviting me to 'draft' the letter of referral to Petrus's new school, 'because he had consideration for what I was attempting to achieve with Petrus'. Furthermore, because he, members of the controlling board and some teachers had been impressed with narrative

ways of working, he provided me with an office on the school premises in order to assist other pupils. I have also been invited on several occasions for collaborative engagement with school pupils on topics they deemed appropriate.

6.5.2. The voices of Diana and Louise in conversation with the discourses on traditional theology, practical theology and pastoral counselling

Because I used contextual feminist theology as the interpretative lens, the voices of the participants in conversation with taken-for-granted cultural and religious discourses focused attention on the way in which these discourses shaped and constrained their understanding of their experiences. Furthermore, their voices alert listeners and readers to the difficulty they had in *learning*, when the learning did not accord with their *lives and context*, stressing the importance of their own experiences as the only measure for 'doing' pastoral care within the framework of practical theology. Moltmann (1979:9) states that *good* theology must be *practical* theology, making *practice* the heart of theological method. At the same time, women ask with urgency today how to articulate a theology and spirituality which speaks to women's concrete life situations (King 1996a:148).

Diana's story brings her into direct conflict or dialogue with the discourses of traditional theology and fundamentalist religious practice and the dispiriting effects these discourses had on her life. Her voice addresses the role of religious education and its preoccupation with past doctrine and dogma, using these to rationalise contemporary experiences by defending established beliefs and practices. By implication it sheds light on the way in which theology can become an instrument of control for those trained in traditional theology and theological methods (or perhaps even more so for those who are semi- or self-trained in these areas). Until very recently, male clerics were regarded as the only interpreters of God's message and revelation. Furthermore, the importance of the lived experiences of individuals, especially women living in patriarchal society, have been neglected or not given sufficient consideration in directing theological method and inquiry.

Religious education as experienced by Diana in her growing years indoctrinated her in the tradition of the church; it was backward-looking, preoccupied with the perpetuation and cultivation of values from previous generations. It can be seen as closer to the intellect rather than the heart. Insufficient importance has been placed on the feelings and emotions of believers, thereby distancing them from any relationship with God and silencing the voice of individual spirituality. This approach has enforced the religious and cultural *status quo*, at the same time reducing the worship of God to a formal type of religion and church-going

practice, which constantly narrows individual interpretation along with codes of personal ethics. Diana's story stresses the need for a constant re-interpretation and updating of Scripture and our definition and understanding of God in order to be in line with both historical and present-day social contexts.

The voices of both women participants are in dialogue with an alternative world view encompassing theology and the reality of God, not as defined by culture or religion, but evident in the lives of ordinary people where God's work and love are recognised. Their stories are witness to sacred encounters which served to strengthen and reconstitute the self. The presence of God is evident in their experiences, challenging the limited roles which the church ascribed to them, at the same time proclaiming that God's abundant goodness is not confined to passages of Scripture. Their voices give testimony that God is a continuously creative and innovative force; in the crafting of their lives, He is a power that will not let them deny their dignity and worth.

There is a feminist saying that the personal is political. The stories of abused women are ultimately a matter of serious religious, cultural and political concern. The voices of the women participants make clear that their personal circumstances and pastoral needs are not individual problems, but cast light on social causes (Graham 1996:173). Through their stories they express what is important in their lives and highlight the fact that an accurate assessment, with regard to the appropriate course of action, can only be made through an understanding of the situation or experiences of the people who are involved in the problematic situation (Widdershoven & Smits 1996:275). Nussbaum (quoted in Widdershoven & Smits 1996:277) argues that people should read stories to learn about discord and to become more engaged in ethical practices. Stories tell us more about morality than any philosophical exposition can. Stories show us the distressing character of life and make us aware of subtle nuances within moral practice.

Diana's voice addresses religious norms which affected the dynamics of her family life and the expectations of giving and receiving care. Her story challenges the discourse on pastoral care and counselling in so far as such care needs to question the typical ways religious power is exercised in the lives of individuals, thereby prescribing how women should be, even how they should serve God. Furthermore, her voice addresses the need for pastoral care and counselling to be particularly sensitive to gender-specific experiences and their role in shaping identity.

Louise's situation focuses attention on the discourse of single parenting and her socio-economic position which made her vulnerable to physical abuse, not having the resources to protect herself – an issue which remains a serious concern for many women in similar circumstances. Her story highlights the issue of social injustice as an important source of human suffering. Because of her social standing she was isolated by society, denying her and her son access to the resources they needed for survival. The extent and consequences of the abuse she suffered were denied and treated as interpersonal difficulties rather than as the abuse of power (Poling 1991:31). Pastoral care and counselling needs to identify 'social injustice and individual abuse of power as evil' (Poling 1991:31). The abuse of power is a 'denial of communion and denial of freedom for self, others, and God, a power which stifles the possibility of mutuality and interdependence' (Poling 1991:31).

Seeking justice in pastoral care and counselling means addressing the issues that adversely affect women's lives, their earning power, safety, social status and sense of self-worth. Giving meaning and significance to their stories requires an understanding of how these stories are communicated within or against specific discourses.

6.6 AND NOW – AFTER THE RESEARCH?

With the research process completed and transcriptions of the stories edited and approved by the participants, I felt uncomfortable about the diminished contact between us. I was left with the feeling of something unfinished in our relationship; having to finalise the remaining chapters of the dissertation was perhaps also a complication. The nature of the research relationship changed from one of intimacy with the participants to one more focused on the reader. I also became aware of the discomfort it caused the participants – I believe they felt neglected. Whenever I did make contact, which was not as frequently as I would have liked, they questioned how little time we now spent together.

Uncertainty as to the ethics of terminating the relationship and being unable to find guidance from any literature on this issue, I discussed the matter with my supervisor, who suggested that I should leave it to the participants to decide when to terminate the relationship. Although my contact with them has become less frequent, our relationship remains sound. I have discussed the issue with them and they understand that I am there for them in certain ways as they are for me (Lieblich 1996:184). Is it ethics, or friendship or immense gratitude for the privilege of having shared this journey with them, for the personal enrichment I have gained on the way? I am not sure. I do know that both of them will always have a very special place

in my heart for their endeavour and their courage, something which nourished my own growth as well as respect for the need for carefully attending to the narratives of the other.

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APPENDIX A

EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUALITY WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE

SUMMARY OF THE PRELIMINARY MEETING WITH THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Dear Louise

It was good seeing you again and I enjoyed the discussions we had regarding the project and our future meetings.

As I discussed with both you and Diana, I have summarised the discussions of the initial meeting we had and now provide you with a written copy for review. Please let me know if there is anything I have forgotten to mention, or about any thoughts that came up afterwards and that you want to add. Please also let me know if anything transpired which may involve your having to change our schedule, etc.

As I have explained to you, the project is undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's degree in Practical Theology (with specialisation in Pastoral Therapy). This means that all our discussions will be summarised and written up as part of a research report that will be handed in as a dissertation for examination by my supervisors and two anonymous external examiners. Academic articles may also be published afterwards, with your knowledge and permission.

After each group session, a copy of our discussions will be passed on to you for verification and any further comments you may have. Furthermore, a copy of the final report will be made available to each of you; for you to check whether you are in agreement with the information as presented and whether you are comfortable with the information contained in the report. Should you agree to participate in the project, you will need to provide written consent for the information obtained during the group sessions to be used in the research report. I will provide you with a consent form in due course.

I mentioned to you that I have often listened to the stories of women who have shared their struggle with me. Their stories tell of being locked into prescribed roles traditionally assigned to women, of having no economic power and having little choice because of demands placed

on them by patriarchal society. So often, their spirituality came into the discussions. For some this was a disempowering spirituality where they often questioned the love of God; for others, God was part of their plans for a better, more hopeful future.

I shared with you my interest in hearing from you your stories, stories of hard times but also of hope. I also mentioned that when we, as women, call and name abuse, hear and grieve the stories of each other, redemption and healing takes place. The project is about women's voices, women interviewing women, standing together in support of each other. It is to identify and challenge the effects of abuse which will also involve us in examining religious, cultural and political stories for their contribution to contexts where abuse occurs. You both mentioned that your spirituality is very important for you. You in fact mentioned that your spirituality carries you at the moment because you know 'that you are precious in God's sight' despite your circumstances. I hope that the project will enable the co-construction of a spirituality for you as women that will serve as a resource to stand against and cope with abusive circumstances.

I was touched when you mentioned that you have previously participated in group discussions with other women who shared your concerns at the time and that you benefited much from the therapeutic interaction which took place. You indicated that you are excited about becoming involved in the same kind of project now as it would strengthen and support you in your present circumstances. We discussed how the project, in allowing the voices of other women to be heard, can connect you with what you are experiencing and how interaction through group participation can assist us to become compassionate witnesses to each other.

I explained to you that, as we were sitting in a circle close to each other at the time, we are all together as co-enquirers into the 'voices' of women; that I am not an 'expert' with any privileged knowledge, rather that the knowledges you have are unique, that you are co-owners of the project. By implication this means that you will have the final say regarding information which concerns you, before it is written up. I mentioned that I intend using an audio-tape for the discussions and you indicated that this would not be a problem for you. However, should you decide rather not to allow it at any stage for any period during our conversations, you may do so. With your permission I will then make written notes. The tapes will be stored in a safe place. I mentioned that the project is supervised by my supervisor, Professor Dirk Kotzé in Pretoria. I mentioned that he will guide me throughout the project and that he will have access to all the work as it is written up. The tapes will be destroyed on conclusion of the project.

I discussed with you the choice of using your names in the project, or if you wish, pseudonyms. I also mentioned that I will at all times protect your anonymity. We have not decided which names we will use as I left it to you to decide.

I asked you to help me structure your future involvement in terms of when we should meet, how often and how long. You indicated that your husband is away from home daily because of his employment and that your only son is attending school in Cape Town. You mentioned that it would be reasonably easy for you to fit in with any plans put forward. We decided that we would most probably try and have one meeting per week which would last approximately two hours for a period of four weeks. You mentioned that it could help you if we could fit in the 'bulk' of the work before the school holidays.

I mentioned to you that no financial reward or payment will be made for participation in the project. I also mentioned that you are under no obligation to participate and that you may withdraw at any time if you so wish.

I trust that the above is a complete summary of our discussions. Please contact me if there is anything you do not understand or wish to change. I look forward to our next meeting.

Kindest regards

Joan Collett

Dear Diana

It was good seeing you again and I enjoyed the discussion we had regarding the project and our future engagements.

As I discussed with both you and Diana, I have summarised the discussions of the initial meeting we had and now provide you with a written copy for review. Please let me know if there is anything I have forgotten to mention, or about any thoughts that came up afterwards and that you want to add. Please also let me know if anything transpired which may involve your having to change our schedule, etc.

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I mentioned to you that I have often listened to the stories of women who have shared their struggle with me. The stories tell of being locked into roles traditionally assigned to women, having no economic power and having little choice because of demands placed on them by patriarchal society. So often, their spirituality came into the discussions. For some this was a disabling spirituality where they often questioned the love of God; for others, God was part of their plans for a better, more hopeful future.

I shared with you my interest in hearing your stories, stories of hard times but also of hope. I also mentioned that when we, as women, call and name abuse, hear and grieve the stories of each other, redemption and healing takes place. The project is about women's voices, women interviewing women, standing together in support of each other. It is to identify and challenge the effects of abuse which will also involve us in examining religious, cultural and

political stories for their contribution to contexts where abuse occurs. You both mentioned that your spirituality is very important for you. You mentioned that the voice of spirituality as you have been living it has been punitive in many ways because your husband makes decisions regarding your life, claiming that he knows what God wants for you and that your inner voice contrasts with that of your husband and other friends.

I was touched when you mentioned that it took a lot of courage to move away from your husband and that you often feel confused, as you hear so many conflicting voices. You said that you were hoping that the project, or our conversations, will strengthen you and further support you to make decisions for yourself and your children. I trust that our conversations will have a healing effect, that together we will be able to co-construct a spirituality for women that will serve as a resource to stand against and help you cope with abusive circumstances.

I explained to you that, as we were sitting in a circle close to each other, we were all together as co-enquirers into the 'voices' of women; that I am not an 'expert' with any privileged knowledge, rather that the knowleges you have are unique, that you are the co-owners of the project. By implication this means that you will have the final say regarding information which concerns you before it is written up. I mentioned that I intend using an audio-tape for the discussions and you indicated that this would not be a problem for you. However, should you decide rather not to allow it at any stage for any period during our conversations, you may do so. With your permission I will then make written notes. The tapes will be stored in a safe place. I mentioned that the project is supervised by my supervisor, Professor Dirk Kotzé in Pretoria. I mentioned that he will guide me throughout the project and that he will have access to all the work as it is written up. The tapes will be destroyed on conclusion of the project.

I discussed with you the choice of using your names in the project, or if you wish, pseudonyms. We have not decided which names we will use as I left it to you to decide. I also mentioned that I will at all times protect your anonymity.

I asked you to help me structure your future involvement in terms of when we should meet, how often and for how long. You indicated that your children attend play school on certain mornings during the week and that you would prefer to meet on those mornings. You also mentioned that you were doing a computer course and that you are applying for employment which makes it difficult to commit yourself over a long period.

I mentioned that I anticipated four group sessions of two hours each, for a period of four weeks. Sufficient time between sessions will be required for reflection and the facilitation of the summaries and letters.

I mentioned to you that no financial reward or payment will be made for participation in the project. I also mentioned that you are under no obligation and that you may withdraw at any time should you wish.

I trust that the above is a complete summary of our discussions. Please contact me if there is anything you do not understand or wish to change. I look forward to our next meeting.

Kindest regards

Joan Collett

APPENDIX B

EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUALITY WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE

INFORMATION SHEET FOR INVITED PARTICIPATION

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please read this information again carefully before finalising your decision to participate. Should you have any questions regarding this information sheet, please do not hesitate to raise them with me.

THE AIM OF THE PROJECT

As I have explained to you, this project is undertaken in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Master's degree in Practical Theology (with specialisation in Pastoral Therapy). In terms of what we have discussed, ideas regarding the aims of the project are as follows:

- to identify and challenge the effects of the abuse;
- to unpack and examine religious, cultural and political stories – especially about gender and power – for their contribution to contexts in which violence and abuse occurs;
- to co-construct preferred stories or 'counter stories' to the stories of abuse; and
- to co-construct new knowledge regarding a spirituality for women that would serve as a resource for transformation where new knowledge, co-constructed during our conversations, can be used to bring about changes in situations that are oppressive.

WHAT WILL BE REQUIRED OF YOU AS A PARTICIPANT

No financial reward or any other form of payment will be made for participation in the study. Should you agree to participate in this project, you will need to provide written consent for the information obtained during the group sessions to be used in the research report. I will provide you with a consent form in due course.

In terms of what we have discussed regarding your commitments with small children, etc., I anticipate that we will meet once a week for approximately two hours at a time; for four consecutive weeks. As I cannot be certain what will evolve from the discussions, we may have to schedule a fifth meeting. We have provisionally scheduled our first meeting for 22 June 2002.

I mentioned that our sessions would be audio-taped to facilitate transcribing the sessions; however, should you wish that I rather make notes I would be happy to do that. After each session, and before the following session, I will provide you with a summary of the discussion. You are invited to comment on and discuss your thoughts and ideas regarding the summary. You are free to change anything related to you or your family. Although the sessions will be in either Afrikaans or English, the report will be written in English, as will the summaries and other correspondence. At your request, these can be translated into Afrikaans.

As already advised, you are free to withdraw from the research project at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information obtained during the sessions will be discussed with my supervisor and will be used in the project. Your comments, corrections and/or feedback will be included in the final report. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the audio-tapes and notes taken during our sessions together. The material will be securely stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed on conclusion of the project.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The results of this project may be published. At your request, details (names and places) will be changed to ensure your anonymity. You will have the choice of using your own name or a pseudonym. A copy of the report will be made available to each participant.

QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE PROJECT

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me:

Joan Collett		or my supervisor:	
		Professor Dirk Kotzé	
		The Institute for Therapeutic	
Telephone	:	023-6163243	Development
Cell	:	082-5319270	Telephone : 012-460 6704

The project has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Practical Theology, University of South Africa and the Institute for Therapeutic Development.

APPENDIX C

**EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED:
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUALITY
WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE**

CONSENT FORM FOR INVITED PARTICIPATION

I have read the Information Sheet concerning the project and I understand its scope and objectives. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I understand that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without disadvantage.
3. I understand that tape recordings with my personal information will be kept confidential and destroyed on conclusion of the project.
4. I will receive no payment or compensation for participating in the study.
5. I am aware that Joan's supervisor will have access to all relevant material.

I am willing to participate in this research project.

.....
Signature of the participant

.....
Date

.....
Name of the participant in capital letters

.....
Signature of witness

APPENDIX D

**EMPOWERING THE UNEMPOWERED:
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO DECONSTRUCTING SPIRITUALITY
WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING ABUSE**

CONSENT FORM FOR THE RELEASE OF INFORMATION BY PARTICIPANTS

1. I have read the transcripts of my story as the research discussions progressed.
2. I have had the opportunity to make changes to each summary, including suggestions, corrections or comments pertaining to my participation.
3. I have also read the final summary of the discussions and agree that this is an accurate and satisfactory account of the research process.
4. I understand that the information obtained during the discussions may be included in an article format for publication.

I hereby give my permission for information concerning myself, to be used in the written report of the project and in any publication. I agree to my own name being used in the research report and in any publication / I would prefer to use a pseudonym in the research report and in any publication. (Delete what is inappropriate).

Name to be used:

.....

Signature of the participant

.....

Date

.....

Name of the participant in capital letters

.....

Signature of witness