

Motherhood as Opportunity to Learn Spiritual Values: Experiences and Insights of New Mothers

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Abstract: This study examined the subjective daily experiences of motherhood as potential opportunities for spiritual awareness and personal transformation. It explored how an enduring commitment to fostering a child through adoption, marriage or conception may lead mothers to embrace a broadened perspective in life that mirrors the core spiritual values of world religions and perennial wisdom traditions. A qualitative analysis of 22 interviews revealed 6 overlapping and interrelated themes: (a) unconditional love and interdependence (b) transcending ego or self-centeredness (c) compassion and empathy, (d) mindfulness and heightened awareness, (e) meaning and purpose in life (f) faith and a higher power.

Keywords: Motherhood, Spirituality, Parenthood

In the last decade there has been a renewed interest in the conceptualization of spirituality with increasing consensus on its definition. Researchers attempting to locate it within a multidimensional framework have identified the following common and interrelated components: self-transcendence, interconnection with people and nature, meaning and purpose, unfolding process of discovery, heightened awareness and senses, enhancement of inner resources, experiences of the sacred or mystery, unconditional love, and ability to manage cognitive complexity such as paradox and ambiguity (DeHoff, 1998; Dyson, 1997; Epple, 2003; Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; LaPierre, 1994;

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Lines, 2002; McSherry & Cash, 2004; McSherry, Cash, & Ross, 2004; L. Miller & Kelley, 2005; W.R. Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Rose, 2001; Tanyi; 2003; Wink & Dillon, 2002).

In addition, there is increasing empirical support for the positive impact of spirituality on the adaptive functioning of individuals across the lifespan for coping and health (Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant & Shouldice, 2005; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Koenig 2001; L. Miller, Davies, & Greenwald, 2000; L. Miller, 2006; Powell, Shahabi, & Thorsesn, 2003; Seeman, Dubin & Seeman, 2003; Wong, Rew, & Slaikey, 2006). Studies have shown that spirituality can catalyze an affirmative change in interpersonal goals, foster a sense of self-perceived healing, ameliorate anxiety and depression, decrease effects of negative life events, and reduce addictions and compulsions (Hamilton, 1998; Kendler, Gardner & Prescott; 1997; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Powell et al., 2003; Regnerus, Smith & Fritsch, 2003). Some scholars have gone as far as naming spirituality the best organizing principle in existence, a powerful transformative dynamic that unifies inner fragmentation and promotes self-actualization (Emmons, 2003, Epple, 2003, Goddard, 1995, Hill et al., 2000, McNeill, 1998).

Although spiritual awakening has been extensively documented in those having experienced religious conversion, drug rehabilitation, a significant loss, trauma, or acute illness, there is to borrow a phrase from Hill (2000), “a strange neglect” of spiritual experiencing as a topic of research in ordinary life transitions (Cartwright, 2001; Emmons, 2003; Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). Language rich in symbols of *transformation*, *transcendence*, and *rebirth* has been historically more available to those suffering through ‘death-defying’ experiences (Neill, 2002; Papathanassoglou & Patiraki, 2003), rather than ‘life-affirming’ ones. The transition to motherhood, a ubiquitous form of quantum change, has not been explored in depth within a spiritual framework despite being universally described as a significant achievement of adulthood for a woman marked by acute redefinitions of self, reappraisals of lifestyle choices, and dramatic shifts in ways of thinking about intimacy, love, relationships, the world, and God (Madaras, 1999). To date, a qualitative study has yet to explore spiritual life in mothers and may reflect a cultural lacuna. In response to this dearth in the literature the current study explores how mothering a child leads women to embrace a new and broadened perspective in life that mirrors the core spiritual values of world religions

(Hamel, Leclerc, & Lefrancois, 2003, Tanyi, 2003). The authors define mothering as entailing an enduring commitment to fostering a child through adoption, marriage or conception.

Spiritual Dimensions of Mothering in the Literature

A literature review revealed only a small number of studies published on the subjective daily experiences of mothers and how mothering a child facilitates spiritual awareness. Although these studies are informative, the spiritual dimension of mothering in the literature on motherhood remains largely unacknowledged. Scholarship that has attempted to explore this phenomenon has been of the following two types: studies of pregnancy and experiences deemed transcendental or sacred and personal interpretations or academic reviews of mothering as a spiritual journey. Studies of the first kind investigated ecstatic, mystical and shamanistic experiences during pregnancy and the birth process (Balin, 1988; Colman, 1969; Colman & Coleman, 1975; Spivak, Spivak, & Wistrand, 1993; 1994; Spivak, Bechtereva, Spivak, Danko, & Wistrand, 1998, Vaughn, 1983). Studies conducted by Spivak et al. (1993, 1994, 1998) concluded that women in labor regularly and predictably experience transpersonal shifts in awareness otherwise unusual in their daily life. These transcendental or metaphysical experiences during childbirth and pregnancy were described as altered states of consciousness such as colorful dreams or near telepathic communication with their baby, or simply an overwhelming sense of joy or rapture. All were striking and recognizable by the mothers but difficult to verbalize. Similarly, Vaughn (1983) found childbirth to be *ecstatic* filled with intense periods defined as “lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience which are characterized by an expansion of consciousness or awareness that exceed an individual’s customarily known or familiar concept of self-identity” (p.201).

Another concept in the literature on pregnancy/birth and spirituality is that of *ensoulment*. Jennifer Hall (2006) explored historical, cross-cultural and religious notions of ensoulment where women described experiences of connecting and welcoming the ‘spirit’ of their unborn fetus through various rituals pertinent to their personal spiritual beliefs and values. Mothers describe talking with, inviting, and welcoming their child-to-be even during the pre-conception period. From this perspective, a mother-child bond grounded in the recognition of the spiritual

nature of the infant is argued to have implications for how optimal prenatal environments (known as “womb ecology”), welcoming birthing practices, and postnatal treatments are defined-- an area of particular focus for the birth psychology community. Growing voices in midwifery and obstetric nursing communities likewise reflect a mission of ‘reclaiming’ the sacred dimensions of birth, and advocate that the guardianship of these experiences should be in the hands of women-centered care (Carver & Ward, 2007; Hall & Taylor, 2004; Jesse, 2007; Jesse & Reed, 2004; Moloney, 2007; Semenic, Callister, & Feldman, 2004). Sharon Moloney (2006) among others, speaks to the potential negative impingement of techno-medical orientations of the perinatal window that may be at odds with women’s intertwined spiritual and physiological needs. Jungian writer Benig Mauger (2000) calls this the “wounded mother” or “lost feminine” whose inarticulate or even pained pregnant and birthing body symbolizes the collective unconsciousness alienation from nature and “loss of soul” connection.

The second type of scholarship considers motherhood in a larger context beyond pregnancy and birth, as a metaphor for spiritual transformation, by attempting to make meaning of the experience through a transpersonal lens or to ground it in the framework of a specific religious tradition. The mother is viewed as undergoing an “ordeal” which is actually an initiation, or rite of passage (Gordon, 2002; Mauger, 1996). Thomas (2001) shares a personal account of her experience, describing how she had not been prepared for the “intense spiritual shift” (p.92) and has since come to believe that “becoming a mother can itself be a form of religious education, one that can have a deep and lasting impact on a woman, and thus on her family...” (p.89). At the time she admittedly did not have the language to accurately capture her disorientation, yet still perceived it as a “deeply religious event” which lent a sense of “breaking open and spiritual initiation” (p. 93). Unable to find a suitable word for the experience, Thomas (2001) borrowed medical anthropologist Dana Raphael’s term ‘matrescence’ – the developmental niche of becoming a mother— calling it a “‘new life structure’...a grace-filled jumpstart into a new way of being in the world” (p.92).

Reconstructing Motherhood, Again

Historically and globally, a woman's biological capacity to mother has commonly mandated it as a female imperative. The questioning of such traditional paradigms has defined the feminist movement for the past 20-30 years in the Western world. Women's liberation movements evolved our notions away from the early idealization of motherhood as the essential or only true nature of a woman's fulfillment and highlighted the lack of power inherent in the mother role. Shortly after the medical lens married motherhood to notions of 'risk' and the postpartum period has come to imply psychopathology and dysfunction. While both orientations have contributed critical and necessary articulations on the problematic aspects of motherhood, they may have unwittingly left little room for alternative interpretations of mothering as potentially *self-empowering* and *growth promoting*. Nested between these various discourses (motherhood as instinctual, motherhood as oppressive, or motherhood as pathological), women may be left unsupported in discovering a deeper spiritual domain – one that can hold the paradoxical experiences of motherhood and to heal a 'maddening' love/hate splitting of maternity. The authors, therefore wish to build upon promising feminist writings that depict motherhood as authentically rewarding despite its difficulties, for example the ethic of care or relationality and moral enlightenment borne of maternal thinking and the daily tasks of mothering (Gilligan, 1982, 1984; Ruddick, 1980, 1983; Smith, 1999a, 1999b). Like the positive psychology movement that has re-injected the positive pole in *interplay* with the negative, these authors too invite optimistic dialogues into feminist theories of motherhood, to gain a more holistic picture. Reclaiming motherhood from a feminist, spiritual perspective allows women to distinguish between the patriarchal or medical "institution of motherhood" which is experienced as marginalizing, and other aspects of mothering that are experienced as valuable. The theoretical ground of maternal development demands re-invention with each generation, as MacMahon (1995) stated, "motherhood has the potential to challenge not only the political order but the deeper cultural images of human nature and the links between society and nature on which the social and political order rests" (p.27).

Working from the empowered position that raising a child can foster personal growth, the aim of this research is to inductively derive whether it in turn produces morally and spiritually

enhanced persons. In light of traditional cross-cultural wisdom that has historically honored birthing and mothering as part of religious and cultural rites, the authors attempt to address the near-eradication of such understandings from contemporary paradigms in the social sciences. This research builds on previous work which already re-conceptualized pregnancy and childbirth from a spiritual perspective – validating the presence of spiritual experiencing– only this time by extending it to motherhood as a whole. The empirical focus therefore of this study is to gain further understanding of the potential impact of children on the domain of spiritual life in mothers. To borrow from Martha McMahon (1995), mothering can be seen as an “essence-making” process and therefore “inverts the conventional idea that mothers produce children and looks instead at how children produce mothers” (p.4). From this standpoint, children are also empowered, as they carry the symbolic and real power to transform their mothers.

The Inclusion of Males as Mothers

As posited by Terry Arendell (2000), “definitions of mothering share a theme: the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children” (p. 1192). Renate Reimann (1997) brought forth the notion of “personal motherhood” – motherhood as identity – whereby motherhood is the identity-shift that moves parenthood to the center of one’s sense of self and purpose (p.165). Sarah Ruddick’s seminal work championed the idea that “...a mother is a person who takes on responsibility for children’s lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I *mean* ‘her or his’” (1995, p.40). Taken together, these definitions privilege the behavioral aspects of motherhood, which, as written, are non-gendered. This research attempts to test these non-gendered notions of motherhood by incorporating the voices of male mothers into the conversation. By creating a space for them to share their experiences, the authors may discover congruent experiences between female mothers and male mothers. Such findings would support contemporary understandings of flexibility within gender norms such that members of each sex are able to adopt/experience phenomena usually associated with the opposite gender or Jung’s theory that feminine and masculine poles reside in all people regardless of biological sex. If found to be true, the fundamental transformation of “a person becoming a mother,” may perhaps be universally available to anyone who engages in the process,

regardless of biological capacity to experience pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding. Such reframing stimulates questions about how much sex matters when performing as a mother since we already extend this right to women unable or unwilling to do so physiologically (e.g., adoptive/foster mothers, infertile women who parent, the non-biological parent in a gay female couple, etc.) (Clarke, 2002; Reimann, 1997). In short, ‘what is a mother?’ For this reason, we are explicitly using the term ‘male mother’ rather than “father” to signify those who engage in *mothering*-- a verb long associated with females, but perhaps accessible to any primary caregiver, regardless of gender or sexual preference (in this case, homosexual males who self-identify as the mother in their partnership). The inclusion of males may offer an invaluable avenue of insight into the potentially transformative impact that motherhood can have regardless of gender or sexuality, and may broaden and deepen the view of traditional paradigms with practical implications for family policy (Gringeri, 2005). We further argue that the “emphasis on ‘women only’ is isolationist...just as earlier scholars were limited by examining men only” (Gringeri, 2005, p.399).

Methods

The aim of the study was primarily exploratory, descriptive, and qualitative. The sampling technique of “snowballing” was selected based on the premise that the researchers were not interested in finding a representative sample, but in accessing marginally excluded groups in the literature, in this case mothers who might give evidence of spiritual experiencing. Graduate students enrolled in a research practicum centered on adult spiritual development were asked to approach two mothers, directly or indirectly known, through their personal networks. Attempts at formal methods of identification were used simultaneously. Invitations of participation through official letters and flyers were sent to daycares and preschools locally and throughout the city. Only one participant responded, suggesting the vulnerable nature of new motherhood may have made mothers reluctant to take part in what appeared to be a more formalized study. Snowball sampling proved to be more efficient and effective, with a resulting sample size of 22 within the course of two school semesters.

Mothers were defined as the primary caretakers and initiators of committing to a child through adoption, marriage, or

conception. Interviews were conducted with two homosexual males who met criteria to be considered as mothers. In total, the sample consisted of 22 mothers ($n = 22$) ranging in age from 22 to 40 — twenty were female, two were male. Participants included twelve White-Non Latino, three Asian, three Latino, and two African American mothers. The majority came from the New York Tri-state area, 12 had graduate education degrees, six undergraduate degrees, and three some college or an associates degree. Twelve mothers identified their religion as Christian, four Jewish, one Hindu, and four participants stated, “None.” The average age of their child was 20 months. Six mothers had two children. Three mothers had adopted children. Table 1 provides a description of the participants’ demographics.

Participants were informed they had been selected because they had been identified as new mothers, within the personal network of the interviewer, willing to speak about motherhood. It was disclosed that participants would be given a semi-structured interview containing a number of open-ended questions with “no right or wrong answers” to be answered as they felt comfortable. The stated intention of the study was to learn how participants had been impacted by motherhood and to “get to know the variety of experiences mothers from different backgrounds have with their children.” In the tradition of Grounded Theory, the research question was purposefully broad so as not to bias responses and to allow for the issue of spirituality to emerge inductively. Interview questions addressed multiple domains of the mothers’ lives: psychological, interpersonal, social, intellectual and spiritual, with only a portion of the questions addressing spirituality explicitly. Interviews were conducted at the home or workplace of the participant. One interview was conducted over the phone. Each participant was interviewed one time only for 1.5 to 2 hours. The data analysis was based on the verbatim transcript which was then analyzed to generate a preliminary set of themes. The research practicum team met bi-weekly over the course of one year to compare and contrast findings. The material was interpreted independently by the authors using a modified line-by-line analysis based on the grounded theory methodology, which resulted in the emergence of 6 main thematic categories. All identifying information (e.g., gender, race, religious affiliation, fertility status, sexual preference, marriage status, etc.) was masked during the thematic analysis in service of uncovering narratives of universal transformative change that might transcended the participant’s individual identities.

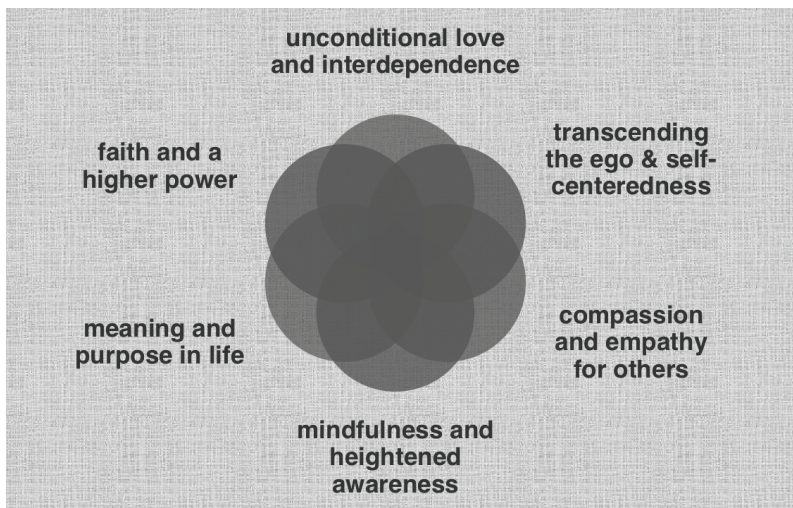
Table 1. *Demographic information of sample participants*

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	20	90.9
Male	2	9.1
<i>Age at Time of Interview</i>		
20-24 years	1	4.6
25-29 years	1	4.6
30-34 years	9	40.9
35-39 years	9	40.9
40-45 years	2	9.1
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian	14	63.6
Latino	3	13.6
Asian	3	13.6
African American	1	4.6
Mixed	1	4.6
<i>Religion</i>		
Catholic	8	36.4
Jewish	5	22.7
None	4	18.2
Protestant	2	9.1
Other	2	9.1
<i>Highest Level of Education</i>		
Graduate School Degree	12	54.5
Undergraduate Degree	7	31.8
Some College	2	9.1
Associates Degree	1	4.6
<i>Household Income</i>		
Greater than \$75,000	19	86.4
\$30,000-\$49,000	2	9.1
Less than \$30,000	1	4.6
<i>Parental Partnership</i>		
2 Parents - Gay Partnership	3	13.6
1 Parent - No Partnership	2	9.1
2 Parents - Heterosexual Partnership	17	77.2
<i>Any Child Adopted</i>		
No	19	86.4
Yes	3	13.6

Findings

The findings presented are the answers given by participants to questions pertaining specifically to their experiences of mothering. Only the traits expressed by mothers that are explicitly concerned with spiritual values delineated by the perennial world religions are included. Six interrelated themes were identified: (a) unconditional love and interdependence (b) transcending ego or self-centeredness (c) awakening compassion and empathy, (d) mindfulness and heightened awareness, (e) finding meaning and purpose (f) questioning faith and a higher power, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Description of six interrelated themes*



Theme 1: Unconditional Love and Interdependence

A mother's child first teaches her the value of unconditional love, the essential foundation "for love-of-other," which mirrors the quality of divine love often described when in the presence of the Creative principle (e.g., God). As with this mother of a 2-year-old daughter and 2-month-old son, the mothers confidently and immediately identified with the theme of loving without conditions:

...totally 100% unconditional. It's like that saying...if you've got a really ugly baby, and it's like you got a face only a mother would love...you love your child regardless and there's times where you may not like what your child is doing, but there's never a time where you don't love your child...it is truly a different and a wonderful understanding of what love truly is...you love and nurture this person for whoever they are, no matter what they are, or what they become. You accept them and love them. Total acceptance.

Some mothers compared their understanding of unconditional love to a journey, an ongoing process of refinement whereby their children continually drew them into greater intimacy, acceptance, and trust. These mothers admitted that in past relationships they had placed limits on love to avoid becoming hurt, but were now unable to do the same.

Nearly all mothers agreed that the love for their children was unlike any experienced before in relationship to another. Many stated that they had not predicted its emotional impact, while others had imagined its magnitude and wished for it in their lives before becoming mothers. Regardless of expectation, their definition of love had come to change radically to one that was now: "a category all to itself," "life changing," "all-encompassing," "overflowing," "greater," "bigger," "deeper," "not quantifiable," "more intense," "overwhelming" and "at a different level" than before. The majority expressed their love with great emotion, as in the following example of one mother with a 3-year-old daughter and 10-month-old son: "I never thought that I could love something that much—I'm gonna cry with just saying that, but I never thought that I could feel that way about another human being."

The majority of mothers stated that as a result of the love for their children, they had also come to a newfound sense of interdependence, connection and general relatedness - another example of a spiritual tenet. One mother with 2-year-old and 3-month-old sons described how the love for her children catalyzed a greater awareness of her inter-relatedness to nature and persons:

Well, I imagined that I would love them, but...it's so much more, they are a part of me, they are me, they are more than me, they have made me more than me...you know, it's really like I'm connected to the earth... they have

made me realize that I am part of the earth...from the earth...having children for me actually brought me down to a more daily experience of it...it's the only relationship in my life [that] will always, always be. There is just no way to undo this relationship. We are connected. I am here for them."

Nearly all mothers conveyed similar stories of a "deep emotional connection" or "bond" with their children, "always carrying" them literally and figuratively. One mother described the inter-woven nature of the relationship:

I just did not realize how intense it would be...all of his [3-year-old] happiness and unhappiness really affect me so much...his ups and downs can affect me so much...when he is teething and he is grumpy and unhappy, that makes me unhappy, and if he falls, or for Halloween [when] he dropped his bucket of candy and I kind of jumped and there was this man walking next to us and he said, "I'll get it,"... and he got hysterical and it made me cry because he got so upset. You don't really realize how it is going to affect you... I think that there is that belief that you are the same person ... he is still so connected. When I hug my husband he gets upset. There is that strong connection.

This form of relational spirituality was spoken of repeatedly. The love for their children was described as awakening to an underlying web. Each utterance used the psychological language of attachment, bonding, relationship, connection, dependency, intimacy, mutuality, and unity when describing the felt-sense of self-in-relation to nature and beings. The quality of this realization was described at times as otherworldly or beyond words and striking in its emotional intensity. Mothers insisted that they could not adequately capture the "profoundness," or "purity," with words. One mother attempting to articulate this love, pointed to a need for spiritual language:

I can't really describe it as a love for any relationship that I have in my life. I can't compare it to anyone in my family or even my husband. It is definitely different...it's expressed differently. It's deepened. The love that I have for her is not a love that I have for anybody else, so it

added an extra love definition...and I didn't know how it would feel. I had no idea...It just feels greater than myself and that I am lucky. I am blessed to be able to love this baby...I'm not as spiritual as I would like to be, but it definitely feels like it's there...I can't verbalize it that well because I'm not that spiritual, and maybe if I was I would be able to explain it better. But it definitely feels bigger than my self, and that's all I can really say.

Theme 2: Transcending the Ego or Self-centeredness

Surrendering self-preoccupation and expanding notions of the self to include an 'other' is a central spiritual value and similarly described by participants in this study as a central feature of mothering. All mothers identified a radical re-ordering of priorities as a result of dedicating themselves to their children and placing their needs above all else. Changes in lifestyle included: altering diet and exercise, restricting travel, avoiding risky behavior, cutting back on work obligations, rethinking professional ambitions, leaving dysfunctional relationships, and reaching out to estranged family members. For most mothers, having their lives "totally re-prioritized" was experienced as natural and automatic-- an imperative in order for their children to have a "head start" and to become "competent and productive" people. Two mothers, one of a 1-year-old daughter and another of a 6-year-old son adopted at 3-years of age, described the pervasiveness of these changes.

Priorities shift entirely...her needs are my priority, so her hunger, her thirst, her development, her love needs come before everything else... since she comes before my basic needs like eating, peeing, showering, she also comes before my higher needs like spiritual or interpersonal or intellectual needs, all take a lower priority because her getting the foundation to be a loving fulfilled person are more important to me than my own stimulation. On the other hand, because it gives me so much to do it, it is not like I feel like I am martyring myself or sacrificing myself.

I think [parenting is] the true meaning of selflessness...Nothing else matters [or] has greater importance. It becomes about this child and what his needs are. When you shop, you shop for them, you no longer shop

for yourself...you kind of just give it up. It wasn't something that I had to work on it just kind of automatically happens...it is just a different view...I started out by saying selflessness...It is just not about me at all. It is about his wants and how do I make his life better? How do I set my life so when I am no longer here his life is going to be great?

Other mothers admitted they had once struggled or continue to struggle with the loss of freedoms and daily responsibilities inherent in childrearing, describing them as both the most rewarding and challenging aspects of motherhood. For two other mothers, this new orientation, or movement beyond ego orientation by placing the needs and motivations of the ego to a secondary position resulted in feelings of unbearable despair and depression. Another mother described this period as a death and rebirth, a sorrow for the life she had to give up, a gradual surrendering to the experience, and an eventual satisfaction and excitement for the future.

While transcending or enlarging the needs and motivations of the self was difficult initially, many remarked on the profound lesson it had taught them. One mother of 9-month-old twins stated that it had revealed an aspect of her character otherwise unknown prior to mothering: "...before I had kids, I could still be selfish and love." Another mother mirrored the sentiments of others who were happy to rid themselves of ego-focus and could not imagine returning back to their former self: "I don't know what I would do with myself. What did I do before I had him? I must have been really lame. I guess I would focus more on myself." Whether a seemingly automatic or effortful process, all mothers spoke of engagement in a period of narcissistic adjustment in which self-interests underwent a "breakdown" or were at the very least tempered. Few mothers spoke of this time as understandably uncomfortable, yet most described it as necessary, even if painful. Of note, participants who described this aspect of the growth process as particularly acute or enduring in its difficulty also described a spectrum of perinatal blues/depressive symptoms.

Theme 3: Empathy and Compassion

Nearly all mothers recognized within them a burgeoning compassion and empathy for others in general, and for other mothers and children, specifically. Two mothers described a shift

in perspective at work, as with this mother of a 2-year-old daughter:

...it has changed the professional work that I do with parents...when a parent comes to me and says...they are struggling with being a parent...I see it differently. I can empathize and sympathize with parents in a different way in my work. Or when you see a parent struggling in the grocery store with a kid screaming, people think you are looking at them like, "Oh my gosh." You are looking at them, [but] with all the sympathy in the world like, "Oh man..."

Three others recounted incidences that had taken place while travelling, stating they would have "looked at it differently" if they hadn't been mothers. For example, one mother mobilized her compassion in action when she helped a stranger clean up after a sick child at the airport, almost missing her flight. Another new mother of a 9-month old daughter depicted her awakened sympathy:

...before we were parents...if there was a screaming baby on the plane [we] would have been like, "Oh my God! Shut the kid up! I can't believe it!" and now...we were flying...and this baby was crying and we were like, "Oh...the poor thing, the poor baby"...we commented on that... we told our other friends..."It's so amazing, when you're not parents...screaming babies, it's like noise to you...but then when you have your own baby, it doesn't become noise!"...and you empathize with the person who's crying...it wasn't annoying... that was like a *huge* difference that stands out for me.

Others spoke of sharing concern for the plight of parents and children outside of their direct daily interactions, such as those they read in the newspapers. In the case of two such mothers, they were taken by surprise by how viscerally they identified with those they didn't even know personally on television. One mother of a 4-month-old son described this experience:

My son was about three weeks old, my boyfriend was flipping through the channels and this show comes on...this man had just found out his son had died...I was crying hysterically...something that I wouldn't have done if I

weren't a mother. Now that I was a mother, my boyfriend had to change the channel because I was crying, just hysterically crying. [He] was like, "...what is wrong with you?" So stuff like that. I do look at the world with bigger eyes. I do have a lot of sympathy and compassion for people...you get what I mean?

Another mother [5-month-old daughter] spoke of regarding everyone as someone's son or daughter: "I started to realize that everyone is like somebody's precious child...as a human being you're very [precious] ... I started to respect people more." One mother [3-month old daughter] found herself becoming "less critical, less judgmental," and "much more compassionate" with her family. Like some mothers, she came to realize that she could not judge other people's decisions, as she could not possibly know all the factors that went into their circumstances. Yet another mother with two sons [2-year-old and 3-month-old] stated that, "being more maternal is being compassionate towards human beings...you can't judge other people's relationships, their marriages...you just don't know what people are going through...obviously there's a change in me, and that changes my perspective."

The pull towards empathic understanding of the experience of others was described as a halo effect, beginning first most intensely within the mother-infant dyad and then rippling out concentrically to first-degree relatives and far and wide globally to strangers. The suffering of a child on the other side of the world was experienced as if it was the mother's own child. Curiously, mothers did not outwardly acknowledge movements towards non-violence, but in the subtext of their utterances were suggestions that this newfound compassion invited a peaceful or peace-making view of the world. Exposure to violence for example in media was intolerable emotionally, if not actively advocated against. Conversely mothers spoke of 'coming to arms' to defend their children or their newfound values when threatened and described becoming simultaneously less empathic and more critical of views that did not align with their moral and ethical re-evaluations.

Theme 4: Mindfulness and Heightened Awareness

Another effect of having children was becoming more mindful and present to surroundings. The mothers described a general heightened awareness of sensory experiences: smells; the ecological environment or earth's natural resources; the safety of surroundings and possible hazards; the magic of the ordinary (water, snow, dogs, trees, flowers, a crow, light and dark, colors); "the simple things" once taken for granted; one's "gut" feelings. All mothers spoke of a 'perceptual distortion' in which these sensory experiences became elastic or intensified in quality. The noticing of everyday objects appeared more technicolor in vibrancy and scope, an inner 'tuning fork' made mothers more present or vigilant; and time was no longer manageable in the same way.

One mother of three daughters [6-year-old, 10-month-old, and 3-month-old] described when she first became "keyed in" to her intuition:

...there is this primal instinct that surfaces. It is like this inner censor that can pick up on... like when I was in the hospital the day she was born, and they took her to the nursery and I went to sleep. All of a sudden I just woke up, and I didn't know why, but I felt like she needed me. Within minutes the nurse brought her in without me knowing and I needed to feed her. I knew I needed to feed her. It is just a very strange thing.

Mothers additionally described patterns of empathic attunement to their child's feelings, needs or whereabouts. This vigilance was typically paired with anxiety or worry for the welfare of their children. Some focused their attention on potential for harm, experiencing an "always-on-call" hypervigilance that scanned the environment to protect their vulnerable child from the accidents and vicissitudes of life. Nearly all mothers spoke of this phenomenon as both a conscious and unconscious act, comprising both of stressful effort as well as an uncanny, intuitive engagement.

Many mothers described physical time as speeding up or slowing down. For some a week was experienced as a month, and for others a day passed as if an hour. One mother described it like a "...time capsule where you would move forward or backward slower" while another remarked on the paradoxical experience of time stopping while simultaneously flying by. She stated that the

everyday, repetitive tasks of motherhood were akin to exercises in an ashram, designed to pull one into presence:

... it's pretty much the same job every day...that definitely slows me down and I feel every moment. That is a nice exercise, a very difficult exercise, and we go back to the idea of going to an ashram...to get to a place where you appreciate every moment...It's a very painful thing because you do have fantasies about the future, delusions about the past, worrying, not being in the present, of being so busy that you are not thinking about what it's like in the moment...I think the moment is very painful...I am very aware that it's a short period of my life...so I have come to really feel calm, accepting that I want to do this.

Inherent in the practice of “slowing down” a new lesson emerged of appreciating the present moment. One mother stated her sons [3-year-old and 3-month-old] had taught her to: “...to live my life in the here and now. To enjoy everything that happens everyday, right now, and not worry about what's gonna happen tomorrow...because time is flying by so fast...I was very oblivious to time before I had children...time is really moving-- get on board!” Another mother came to this learning through observing her two-year old son: “children are just so free and that is because they are living in the moment.” Yet others' experience of “timelessness,” came in the form of flashbacks to their own childhood or seeing themselves enact their own parents (e.g., a turn of phrase, preparing a familiar meal, etc.). This led one mother to reframe life as existing on a continuous cycle of death and rebirth.

Through mindful, authentic, present, attention, mothers discovered an inner resource of patience and sensitivity-- the ability to be available and responsive to their children. One mother [9-month-old daughter] relayed her surprise: “I'm learning that I actually have a lot more patience than I ever thought I did! I have a lot more...endurance...I can handle stress a lot better...than I ever did before.” Another mother stated appreciation for this capacity to positively affect her 3-year-old son: “...you have to be really present and thinking. If you want to turn off they know you are turning off, it's very interesting ...I would miss having to be responsive in this kind of a way with positive intention... I see that when I communicate in an honest way I get a child who is calmer and responsive and aware.”

For many mothers this newfound approach was filled with wonderment. The child's awe was described as contagious and mothers described the world becoming 'revitalized' with imagination and recollecting their own forgotten childhoods:

A wonderful thing about having children is that you can see everything with new eyes. Like a thing that you may have become immune to, that it doesn't seem that interesting...you may walk past those hub caps and he will kind of focus in on things. I took him to the zoo in central park, although he is really little, but we went to the penguins, and I kind of enjoyed the penguins, that sort of new experience...you re-experience things...

This heightened awareness for the "simple" or "little things" brought fulfillment and happiness. One mother of a 2-year-old son learned to, "forget about the stupid stuff that you get caught up in and instead to focus on the simple beautiful things in life." Mothers agreed that their children had gifted them with "new eyes," "better eyes," or "different eyes" with which to view the world and its experiences. Ordinary objects became extraordinary and the natural world became alive and instructive of a new philosophy for life that brought ease and flow:

...you forget how simple life can be and it is so very simple for them...they just say it like it is, and you realize that it's really not as complicated as you make it...you can really make your life, fairly, fairly simple. When you see it through their eyes, it is simple, and it is clear...you weed out the mess, and you tend to lose that as you're growing up and trying to make it in the world. And then you look at a little innocent child, and they see it just so simple. It makes it easy.

Theme 5: Meaning and Purpose in Life

Mothers spoke to gaining a broadened perspective of what the meaning and purpose of life might be. The majority described it as participating intentionally in the life cycle through fostering a child's development. Some understood their fulfillment as being a vehicle of nurturance where children were living entities who were always "absorbing and taking in" what the mothers put in: "...my place in the world is to help children grow" or "the joy of

watching a little soul grow.” The marrying of one’s purpose with the care of another was also expressed by the mother of a sick child [6-year old son] who concluded, “those who aren’t perfect...still don’t deserve any less... my place is to take care of him and to do everything in my power to make him better and give him the best possible life.” Most agreed they would not want to have missed out of the experience of raising children, as stated by one mother [2-year-old and 6-month old sons]: “I would miss everything. I can’t separate what they bring to life. I would miss how completely complicated things are in a good way...that things are really textured...I would feel less grounded.”

As stated above, many came to a deep appreciation of the complex nature of life and strived for a sense of peace or acceptance with this fact. Their purpose was to find happiness regardless of life’s circumstances, as stated by this mother [5-month-old daughter]: “I think it’s like everything in life...the every day is a struggle and you have to come to terms with it because it’s a change in your life, you know?...and lots of demands, but to know that it’s part of it and it’s OK.” Another mother [2-year-old and 3-month-old sons] spoke to the struggle inherent in this profound reorientation:

It truly is a calling of the unconscious that we have, that is pulling us to be much more than just surviving every day, going out and bringing home the bacon, cleaning the house, you know...it’s obviously much more, our dreams are so rich...motherhood has made me be sensitive to that for my children, but it’s grounded me to the earth and to not necessarily be, you know, up here...it’s a struggle.

One single mother through egg and sperm donation found her fulfillment as result of life’s twists and turns:

...one of the big lessons is that things don’t always work out the way you want them...but that doesn’t mean that the way it works out is going to be any less...I love these kids [9-month-old twins]...as much, if not more, then if I used my own eggs, and if I was married...I can’t even imagine...It’s the same, if not more.

Conversely, many described a loss of meaning in what was once valued. One mother of three children [6-year-old, 1-year old twins] learned that it could no longer be gained from, “just going

through life collecting things, going on vacations and that kind of stuff." Nearly all stated that what was important in life did not emphasize money, achievements, or the appearance of perfection and mastery. The language they used was process-oriented, as life's meaning-making was described as a "journey," "lessons learned along the way," and "ever evolving." For one adoptive mother, the very idea of process was the meaning of life itself: "...you learn to love each other...you don't want to love him the second you pick him [2-year-old] up at the hospital...it's a long process...I think life is all a big evolutionary process...a big life lesson is [that it's] all evolutionary."

Mothers demonstrated a striking comfort with ambiguity, a hallmark of cognitive complexity, as many were comfortable with not yet having clarity as to the exact meaning and purpose of their lives. Not knowing paradoxically allowed mothers to be open to their experiences. One mother [9-month-old daughter] felt that she had something important to learn from her child even if, "...that meant I haven't figured it out 100%." The majority of mothers described this learning as unfinished and to be revealed in time. Another adoptive mother with a 2-year-old daughter acknowledged feelings of appreciation for not having all the answers:

I don't know if I know it yet. I don't know if it's all there yet. I think that it's a process. I think that Lydia and I are going to experience it all together. So I don't know if I've figured...what that lesson is. Right now I just feel so incredibly lucky. Sometimes I think, "Wow, what did I do to deserve this?" You know? How did I get such a great little kid? All those things you know? How lucky I am. I get worried. I think, "Oh no, did I use up all my luck on this one (laughter) kind of thing?" So I don't know. That good things can happen in your life? I think that we just came together to make each other's lives good. To be a part of each others lives...

One mother [2-year-old daughter and 2-month-old son,] like others, conveyed a sense of anticipation, stating she looked forward to finding out as she went along: "I think there's a purpose why everyone's brought together, and she was given to us for reasons that we may never know, or we'll find out as we go through our path down life...things that we're supposed to learn from her, and she's supposed to learn from us...she's been given to us for a reason, and I definitely feel that."

Theme 6: Faith and the Sacred

Finally mothers spoke about their new/renewed attention to spiritual matters, a return to faith or exploration into the existence of a higher power. For many, conception, undergoing a successful delivery, or receiving a healthy child and watching them undergo development was experienced as “miraculous,” “amazing,” “awe-inspiring,” “an act of God,” as described by the following mothers:

I guess I became more open. I'm not religious, but I grew up in Catholic family...I always believed that there's a supernatural thing, but now I strongly believe in that...there has to be someone above us to make all these miracles...getting pregnant, and then having Suzie [5-month-old]...the way she kind of blossoms...just like watching things unfold in front of me it makes me feel like there are kind of biological programs installed by someone above there 'cause...everything, every small thing is just amazing!

...the day they [3-year-old and 10-month-old] were born...they were healthy and then they had their Apgar test...they both scored so well...It was truly a miracle of life...to see that come out of your body. This perfect little person right here...[I] said some prayers that day...in the hospital they have a clergy member who comes to visit you and bring you communion...it just sort of went hand-in-hand...this miracle that happened, and then you have...a clergy member come...it just seemed to really flow, and I said, “Wow, yeah, this really is something!”

For many mothers this process initiated a curiosity into questions that were long forgotten. Mothers spoke of becoming “more aware” and “philosophical about some of the existential questions and realities.” It prompted them to re-engage in what they believed was the source of life and death or how the universe operated, as described by this mother:

On a spiritual level, I don't know...I have a patient who is dealing with issues of death in her family...what happens when someone dies and their spirit? All that...is significant...I haven't quite thought about it with Adam

[9-month-old] in those terms yet. I don't want to, I guess. I have wondered is Adam just a happenstance based on the particular sperm and the particular egg that met and all the cells they created? Or is there a sort of life, soul, spirit that would have come into his body regardless?...I haven't resolved that...

These questions led most mothers to consider whether they wished to indoctrinate their children into the faith systems they grew up in themselves. Others confidently did so through birth rituals and religious educations, as described by the following mothers:

...after I got Lydia [2-year-old]...I grew up Catholic...I went back to church and she's been baptized and I plan on raising her Catholic and we go to church...I thought about those things differently too. I want her to have that, some of that religion and spirituality, and understanding of God in her life. I never thought when I was single...I didn't think about it so much and now it's really important to me that she has that too.

I was always somewhat in touch with [Jewish ancestry]...I never had sense of wanting to pass it on...I never realized how valuable that was to me...He [2-years-old] goes to Jewish school...we take him to synagogue once a quarter... I'm not sure how we are going to teach it to him...but we'll figure that out as we go along.

Regardless of religious affiliation, mothers conveyed a wish to give their children, "...a better understanding of what life is about." For some, their children's questioning deepened their own, as described by one mother: "...when she [1-year-old] starts kind of questioning and wondering about the mystery of the universe. I think it will be exciting and interesting how she actually makes sense of the world in that way. I would look forward to maybe learning more about spirituality through her..." Another mother stated that her faith had deepened because her spiritual values now had to be put into practice if she wished to transmit them to her 3-year-old and 3-month-old sons:

...the best feelings I've had have been...that Christ just loves us unconditionally and forgives us for our sins and so

certainly if he can do that can't I...help my son to see the same aspects of life?...if I can do that, love unconditionally, then holding a grudge because he spilled milk on the table top really seems unimportant. [It] does make your spirituality a little more in your face as far as do you really walk the walk, and talk the talk? Or are those just words?

Other mothers spoke of a similar strengthening of faith practices initiated by a desire to ensure their children's safety through direct connection with God's oversight. One mother began to, "...pray at night and thank God for keeping him [3-year-old] safe because you could wake up one day and he's changed, he's sick..." Another spoke to a permanent commitment to God upon successful conception:

The minute I got pregnant I started going to church more...I don't know if that sounds like a hypocrite...you know how people say you only turn to God when you are in trouble?...I cared about something. I wanted it to turn out good. I went to church once a week...every Sunday and if I couldn't make it, not too far from here there is a Catholic church and I would stop in and I would light a candle and I would say a prayer for my son [4-month-old]. I prayed every night that I would have a healthy and happy baby...I became closer to God because of my son. I just wanted the best for him. And it made me feel better...I did become more religious as I became a mother or the minute I got pregnant ...I still go to church every Sunday...When I go to mass I come out feeling better. I do.

In general, most mothers spoke to becoming more religiously/spiritually-minded as a result of the relationship with their children even if they didn't have definitive orientations. One mother of 9-month-old twins stated that because of her experience becoming a mother she confidently gained, "a spiritual connection-I know there's a God out there." Another mother of a 1-year-old son stated that she had, "...always felt that there is something bigger than we are out there...I don't know looking over us or something and I feel it now more..." One mother's love for her daughter [1-year-old] spurred a longing to believe in a higher power: "I'm not quite sure how I understand spirituality in my own life but I sure more than ever do wish that there was a God and that there was a heaven because I hate the idea that she

would ever suffer or hurt or die...or that I am going to die and leave her.”

Discussion

This study identified six areas of spiritual experiencing in new motherhood. These interrelated, overlapping themes include: unconditional love and acceptance of interconnectedness; self-transcending one's ego through a transformation of personal priorities; empathy and compassion for others extended in thought and action; mindfulness and heightened awareness to subtleties in the environment and becoming more present and patient; an unfolding discovery of the meaning and purpose in life marked by a comfort with ambiguity and cognitive complexity; and a renewed faith or interest in the sacred through existential questioning and return to religious teachings. These descriptions reflect the same widely recognized core concepts used to define spiritual beliefs and processes in the literature of perennial wisdom traditions. These qualitatively derived themes also matched well with those found in one study of the therapeutic impact of a relationship with a spiritual guru: transpersonal or mystical qualities, finding one's authentic self-nature, a heightened sense of understanding of the sacred, greater awareness of unconditional love within one's own being, and a shift in perception regarding the self in relation to the world (Matsu-Pissot, 1998). In the case of motherhood, the child can be thought of as spiritual teacher that similarly catalyzes spiritual transformation. The child as ambassador of the Creative principle is the first observer and confirmer of the spiritual potential dormant in each new mother waiting to be lived out. When invited rather than imposed, commitment to a child may be a profound and empowering spiritual activity essentially equivalent to more typically accepted practices that promote spiritual growth (e.g., religious sojourn).

As this study aims to demonstrate, children have the potential to gift mothers with the unique experience of finding unconditional love within their own being, a quality of ultimate trustworthiness and acceptance often described as one in the same as the love of “God for the world” (McNeill, 1998, p.337). Virtually all mothers described intense feelings of intimacy that conferred “a potent, dramatic and uplifting emotional-perceptual shift” (Hart, 2000, p.40) toward ever increasing and deepening experiences of connectedness and interdependence. Such relatedness is considered one of the greatest forms of attained

maturity by many psychological theories that place relational engagement as primary. For examples, it could be argued that these mothers embodied the highest stage in Carol Gilligan's (1982) relational model which involves the integration of others' needs with those of the self, as contrasted with a more unilateral focus on one's own desires at the lowest stage (Luthar, Doyle, Suchman, & Mayes, 2001; Ray & McFadden, 2001). For Ruddick (1980, 1983, 1995), the daily tasks of mothering, replete with their positive and negative dimensions, were theorized to evoke a new morality in the minds of mothers-- one that centered on an ethic of connectedness, caring and interdependence rather than detachment, independence and competition. Might then these mothers be pronouncing the very incremental movements of a moral evolution?

From the standpoint of spiritual teachings, consciousness cannot reach higher states without an enduring commitment to a larger reality, or something "wholly other" (Daschke, 1993; Robinson, 1985). In spiritual development, growth is actually evoked by "free participation" in the breaking down of an "immature, prideful self" (McNeill, 1998, p.334). The first stage of that path is self-centeredness and the next, a turning away from the self as the main source of significance. Inevitably through caring for a child, mothers experience an enlargement of concerns, or a "widening circle of empathic identification" (Vaughan, 2002, p.24), re-prioritizing personal needs to a secondary position and aligning their own motivations and goals with that of another. While mothers recognized the challenges inherent in surrendering self-preoccupation, the majority faced it willingly and deemed it a necessary and welcome expansion of selfhood (McNeill, 1998, Athan and Miller, 2004). When viewed from a feminist, spiritual perspective, the loss of ego experienced through mothering is a sacred calling to self-realization and evolution. This is in stark contrast to contemporary notions that motherhood engulfs or restricts, rather than enhances and empowers, due to the ego-death required (Weaver & Ussher, 1997). This opposing viewpoint is exemplified in the questions typically asked of women after motherhood: "When are you going *back to* ___?" From a spiritual perspective the movement is meant to be progressive not regressive, and to flourish from inside, out. Most religious and spiritual traditions state that compassion can be cultivated and tended, like a seed planted that extends and grows and strengthens, leaving the consciousness transformed in long-lasting ways (Vieten, Amorok, and Schlitz, 2006). Mothers in this

study radically challenged their previous notions of autonomy and success, identified with the plight of vulnerable others, and experienced a profound shift in their ethical conduct as they became protectors of their values, and even changed jobs to align with their new priorities (Weaver & Ussher, 1997). The development of compassion and its correlates (love, kindness, generosity, altruism, etc.) is indeed a source of great strength—one that re-aligns us with our relatedness and connectedness to all things, moves us away from narcissistic self-centeredness (Vieten et al, 2006), and in the hands of mothers transforms them into agents of change in the world.

Compassion and empathy for others is at its core a form of receptivity common in spiritual contemplation that can attend to realities ordinary consciousness overlooks. In many ways it stimulates a mother to see the world through two sets of eyes—her own and those of her child's. For many, it is as if a 'light switch' is turned on that gifts them with "new eyes" that can "turn crises into marvels" a newfound ability to view objects from "a different angle—from the divine angle" (Linthorst, 1993, p.19-20). Mothers speak of a new or refined "perceptual sensitivity to energy, sound, light, and subtle levels of consciousness" (Vaughan, 2002, p.21). This sensitivity automates a mindfulness in mothers that explicitly appreciates the profound simple things rather than the trivial. As opposed to "an egoic sense of self that functions to foreclose access to the sacred," mothers experience a mindfulness or heightened awareness, a discernment for the deeper more latent aspects of life which goes beyond appearances to find one's "mainstay in Being rather than Doing and Having" (Adams, 1996, p.31). Mothers exhibited a natural empiricism, testing theories and arriving at insightful philosophies into the workings of nature. For example, mothers noted that when they practiced collaboration and non-violence, or sensitive attunement and patience, it was the most effective methodology—evoking the best in themselves, their children, and by extension all living things. Their thinking further demonstrated a "spiritual intelligence" defined as the ability to manage cognitive complexity, to see things as they are, free from distortion (Vaughan, 2002). This newly evolved way of interacting with the world "embraces the notion of paradox and incorporates feelings as well as logic and reason in making judgments" (Wink & Dillon, 2002, p.80). Mothers spoke of simultaneously feeling pain and joy, strength and weakness, hate and love, and experiencing the mundane and profound in each act of mothering. For the most part they

tolerated well the ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox of their plight (Oberman & Josselson, 1996), not via a passive resignation, but a "going with the flow," a listening to and following inner guidance to find peace and equanimity in the face of life's existential challenges (Coward, 1989; Emmons, 2000).

If spirituality, "connotes the self's existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualized understanding of the sacred," then mothers indeed have lived this out fully (Wink & Dillon, 2002, p.79). As demonstrated by their powerful narrative accounts, women embarked on a spiritual journey through mothering relatively autonomous of institutionalized religious traditions or explicit facilitation by a counselor. When motherhood is harnessed as an opportunity for positive self-change, mothers' voices regardless of gender, are dominated by themes of self-actualization and personal growth in moral and spiritual domains. However due to the lack of discourse on spiritual development in motherhood, mothers may not appreciate the extent of its spiritual potential. While researchers have successfully culled narratives of spiritual awakening from those facing terminal illness, injury, or loss, motherhood has not historically been perceived as a life event that mobilizes similar self-reflection or existential questioning. It is more likely that women are not framing their powerful maternal experiences in these terms because they may simply not know to do so. Paul Trad (1990) stated, as "an expectant mother is transformed...into a 'Mother'; she herself may be the last to understand the physical and psychological changes taking place," (p.342) and accordingly, by extension, may never communicate even deeper spiritual knowing. The discrepancy between women's actual lived experiences of motherhood and their borrowed notions of it from cultural myths (Thurer, 1994) and scientific theories may be placing mothers at risk for an unachieved maternal identity and psychological distress. Without any rites of passage or alternative interpretive frameworks to illuminate the presence of their spiritual work, mothers are finding themselves traversing a path to enlightenment in isolation. Where are women being informed that to embark on the transition to motherhood is to undergo a spiritual transformation of consciousness? Unlike other spiritual "crises" that may befall us unwittingly, motherhood can be reconstructed as an empowered choice to willfully embark on a spiritual journey. From the Jungian point of view there is no spiritual neutral ground and motherhood, like the mountaintop, is no exception (Athan & Miller, 2005).

Limitations

Several limitations exist in this exploration of the potential for spiritual awakening and transformation concomitant with motherhood. First, the degree to which the findings generalize to the population of U.S. mothers and beyond is unknown due to the constraints of the sampling technique and the small sample size. The authors therefore do not make global claims that the confirmatory voices of our participants reflect the same reality for all mothers, but may be a possibility for some. Another limitation is the homogeneity of its participants. The majority of the mothers were white, educated women in the middle-to-upper-class socioeconomic strata, living in and around a major cosmopolitan city in the East. Therefore, the generalizability of these findings to participants from other geographical areas with different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds is uncertain. The similarity of their concerns, however, to those of mothers from other studies as well as the male, ethnic minority, and gay participants in this study suggests that their experiences of spiritual transformation through motherhood may indicate a more universal process than previously believed. The lack of explicit spiritual language for the majority of the participants may also be considered a limitation as the authors had to abstract the interview material to a 'meta' level of analysis using a spiritual interpretive framework. It could be further argued that the mothers themselves given more time and distance from their early transition would be able to similarly put motherhood in this perspective, if followed-up and interviewed again. Or perhaps spiritual awakening is not a given, but a *potential* experience for mothers that may only be mobilized under the right (yet to be determined) set of conditions.

Conclusions

Motherhood appears to be an opportunity for spiritual awakening. The spiritual experiences expressed in the data highlight thematic patterns comparable to those found in other widespread life-transitions (e.g., terminal illness, separation from loved ones, migration from country of origin, loss of belongings, caring for elderly parents, etc.). Since such comparisons have been conspicuously absent in the literature on mothering, this research is an attempt to re-authorize the missing spiritual voice within motherhood so it may dialogue with the other voices

already established, or yet to be considered. Further study, qualitative and quantitative, is recommended to investigate for whom in particular the self-transcendent experience confers health. More specifically, which subgroups of mothers are more likely to experience positive transformation versus anomalous stagnation, for example, in the form of post-partum depression? Since spiritual language has only recently integrated into the vernacular of contemporary society, psychological and religious communities are critical arenas honoring and facilitating the spiritual quest spurred by major life events. The authors hope to sensitize clinical practitioners to the spiritual dimension of mothering and to use these findings when working with mothers to help them overcome fear that the quantum and de-centering changes they may experience are merely signs of mental illness rather than potential moral/spiritual evolution. For many women the gap between the expectations and idealizations of motherhood and its realities is a humbling experience that in itself may be a form of initiation. It could be argued that this 'disillusionment' may be the very window for either psychopathology or spiritual awakening to emerge. This study like others noted that many participants kept silent about their experiences, or had never explored them in depth, until interviewed (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). Mothers would therefore benefit from forums that can assist them to consciously process and articulate the positive and negative experiences of motherhood and to harness the health-conferring dynamic of spirituality which is abundant, yet perhaps dormant, within new mothers.

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