Exploring a Holistic Content Approach to Personal Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explored through narrative analysis phenomenological experiences of personal meaning. While meaning theorists, such as Frankl (1962) and Wong (1998a) have written about a sense of meaning that is ever-present and connected to one’s *being*, research of late (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Klinger, 1998) has mainly conceptualized meaning as a function of action and progress. Thus, one major purpose of this narrative inquiry was to seek out the interplay of *meaning through being* and *meaning through doing*, as drawn from Frankl (1962), May (1961), and other existential psychologists. The impact of religious identity and spiritual identity on two separate processes of *creation of meaning* and *discovery of meaning* was analyzed. The study found that a primal experience of meaning is indeed present in the stories of the individuals. The results suggested that speaking about meaning integration, of *being* and *doing*, are closer to human experience than searching for meaning. It was also found that meaning integration can occur through chance encounter or by purposefully manipulating one’s environment. The topics of expanding the sacred to include the immanent world, and willful versus willing approaches to personal meaning were discussed. The analysis was used to consider the meaning based theories of Frankl (1962), Baumeister (1991), Park & Folkman (1992), Maddi (1998), and Wong (1998). Pastoral counseling implications and issues for further study were also considered.

*Keywords*: Personal meaning, narrative analysis, narrative inquiry, searching for meaning, sacred, phenomenological experiences, meaning integration, existential, *meaning through being*, pastoral counseling, religious and spiritual identity
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CHAPTER I

Pastoral Significance

Author and social-anthropological commentator, Daniel Quinn (1995; 1996; 2002; 2006) published a series of novels that question the heavy handed focus on progress and production that is characteristic of the modern global community. In one novel entitled, The Holy (2002), the following reflection was narrated,

"It was on this night, sitting beside Gil in a relaxed silence and driving nowhere, the he first realized how deeply satisfying it would be to stay on this road forever, to never turn back – to renounce achievement and the self-imposed pressure to achieve, to abandon the thrust to get somewhere. To purify himself of the very concept of destination." (p. 176)

Ultimately, I read Quinn as talking about life meaning. The following literature review in chapter 2 will explore the construct of meaning in existential psychology, and as it relates to the psychology of religion. While I shall show that meaning theory is multifaceted, the conventional tools of meaning measurement are only beginning to point at its fullness. The aim of this study is to uncover pieces of meaning theory that seemed to have fallen by the wayside.

A central point of this study was to emphasize the meaning through being; meaning that is not first and foremost associated with goal-oriented behavior (Frankl, 1962; Baumeister, 1991; Tillich, 1980; Yalom, 1980; Wong, 2008). While this raw and innate resource of meaning has been shown to be accessed in trying times as a form of intrinsic right to human dignity (Miller & Keys, 2001), this study will aim to see if this resource appears in the meaningful stories that people tell. It is my hope that this dissertation will shed a new perspective on how meaning is engaged and thought about in one’s life. In particular in the therapeutic relationship, I hope that this study’s results will
encourage the therapist to highlight a fuller picture of meaning in a client’s life, no matter the level of success or desperation. The focus of this chapter is to ground the topic and methodology of this dissertation in pastoral relevance.

Ganzevoort (1993; 1998a; 1998b) prepared the ground for the importance of using narrative analysis in the field of Pastoral Counseling, and specifically in the topic area of meaning in religion. Ganzevoort (1998a), borrowing from Pargament (1997), defined religion as the, “search for significance in ways related to the sacred,” (p.32) and coping as the, “search for significance in times of stress” (p.163). Therefore, he emphasized that both religion and coping involve the process of meaning formation. Ganzevoort (1998a) criticized the research of meaning in religion on a number of grounds, including, and pertinent to the current study, that the research is mostly based on quantitative analysis. Ganzevoort listed this as a limitation because he argued that religion is not stable over time, thus it is hard to capture a dynamic construct only through an empirical lens. Also, he argued that, “processes of signification and interpretation, studied in a field so complex and with so little sound theory available, demands an emphasis on qualitative research (p. 261).”

Ganzevoort identified four different factors the must be considered when looking at meaning in the context of religious coping. There are religion, coping, identity, and social context. Religious coping was transformed into a multidimensional model in which these four factors are all interacting and impacting one another regularly. Ganzevoort (1998b) suggested that through the lens of narrative theory a more complete picture of meaning seeking in the religious context can be gleaned. He argued that by attending to the elements of a narrative (author, story, audience, and purpose) one may begin to weave
together the interactions of religion, coping, identity, and social context. In other words, Ganzevoort made a case for the use of narrative exploration in these meaning based factors, specifically in the field of pastoral counseling (Ganzevoort, 1993). The current study will also explore the relationship between religion, coping, identity, and social context as a means for understanding the subtle levels of meaning in our lives.

Through the telling of stories an individual weaves together a personal narrative which is a key process of pastoral counseling. The process of narration organizes and gives meaning to an otherwise random flow of events that occurs to the one experiencing (Arciero & Guidano, 2000). As the stories and events change continuously, the central character of the stories is held constant. This is called the narrative identity. Through the telling of stories the individual organizes their hypothesis about what is occurring in life (Roger, 1951), and attempts to answer the, “fundamental questions: Where am I? What am I? Who am I (p.277)?”

Creation of the personal narrative and narrative identity is a relational process. An individual, through telling one’s story, is shaped within a particular social context and a particular group of people. Thus, when exploring the origin of religious beliefs in a client, the entire personal narrative should be taken into account and not simply overtly faith-related teachings or incidents. Ganzevoort (1993) made a case for using primarily qualitative inquiry in the field of pastoral counseling. He stated that because of the complexity of the life story it may be impossible to use standardized inquiries, and qualitative analysis is more useful in theory development when a subject has not been sufficiently explored. Personal narrative interviews are stated as the preferred method because they are the most open to unexpected results. The goal of collecting narratives is
not to gather historical fact, but to piece together how an individual interprets and gives meaning to their life experiences. In contrast to the random selection of statistical methodology, the author suggested using theoretical sampling the specifically aims at a diverse sample.

For the current study, I will use narrative accounts gathered from a diverse group of participants to explore personal meaning. There is pastoral relevance in the way that I am approaching my research questions, which are presented in chapter 2. There is also pastoral significance in the topic of personal meaning because a major function of religion and spirituality is providing one with a sense of sustained meaning (Silberman, 2005). I will ultimately conclude that people do speak about a meaning that is ever-present, which may or may not utilize religious and spiritual language. The common denominator for all experiences of meaning will be shown to be rooted in an awareness of being, which I refer to as meaning through being. I suggest that attending to meaning through being lends to an experience of meaning that is more holistic and is beneficial for one’s overall well-being.

The following chapter consists of a literature review that will continue to make a case for the use of narrative analysis in the study of meaning, and how this methodology is intimately connected with the field of Pastoral Counseling. The literature review begins with bringing to light the complex interdisciplinary nature of meaning. While this paper is focused on meaning from a humanistic-existential psychology perspective, it is important to take note of the field’s philosophical and theological predecessors. Thus, the review highlights the major historical trends of the relevance of pure being in the works
of existential philosophers and theologians. Both Western and Eastern thinkers are represented.

The review continues by introducing the work of Viktor Frankl (1962) as a pioneer of bringing meaning to the center of the human experience. We shall see that Frankl is supported by the bio-evolutionary perspective of meaning as a human adaptation to our environment, though Frankl, like Quinn (1995), calls for a new relationship between humans and the world. Instead of asking what does one need from the world in a given moment, one should ask, “what does the world need from me in this moment (Frankl, 1962)?”

Next I discuss the work of the contemporary meaning researcher Baumeister (1991). His focus on the cultural and social aspects of meaning formation introduces a social constructivist conception of meaning. This paradigm is at the core of narrative analysis and is integral to the current research project. In chapter 6 I will explore the cultural conflicts to personal meaning that seem to readily exist in our society. Baumeister’s understanding also helps to see how the meaning process in humans is a survival adaptation which helped to expand our inner world by creating a variegation of emotions. In addition to this sophistication of the emotional world, meaning serves the basis for the ontological survival tool of self-affirmation (May, 1983). With the process of self-affirmation we begin to look at the moment-to-moment business of meaning making. This is parallel to the work of Maddi (1998), who wrote about the meaning making process in decision making and the meaning based personality construct of hardiness. The quality of hardiness is a concrete perspective that shows how meaning protects against ontological anxiety.
Further into the literature review, I look at the perspective of meaning as goal fulfillment (Emmons, 2003). One assumption of the current study is that although theories of meaning talk about meaning in a diverse fashion, the cultural message in Western society is that meaning is to be found in what one does and accomplishes.

This idea is made clear in Quinn’s (2006) profoundly simple book entitled, *Work, Work, Work*, where a gopher digs his day away without allowing for the possibility that there can be meaning outside of work. On a more sophisticated level, obsessive goal focus is often an Eastern critique of Western life (Hahn, 1991; Chödrön, 2003). Related to the idea of goal pursuit is a discussion about different types of happiness that involves pure pleasure seeking or includes an aspect of meaningful activities or a desired meaningful outcome (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). The latest research suggests that long-term happiness is tied up with a broad sense of meaning that encompasses purpose and also a sense of competence and coherence.

Antonovsky (1979) introduced the meaning-centric construct of sense of coherence in order to reconfigure the way the medical world thinks about pathology. He argued for a salutogenic continuum to understand health and illness. People are not simply healthy or sick; rather each individual falls on a spectrum between health and disease, never fully reaching either extreme. His was a voice that deemed worthy the study of healthy people to see what one is doing to maintain a healthy life. Antonovsky’s concept of sense of coherence, with meaningfulness at its core, became a key measurement to predicting health in a cutting-edge perspective. Looking at the constructs of sense of coherence and hardiness are important to our study because they express a
clear connection between meaning and identity, a bond that becomes evident through narrative analysis.

Returning to Baumeister (1991) the review explores the basic needs of meaning: purpose, value, self-worth, and efficacy. His identified need for self-worth brings up another key concept, that of dignity. The humanistic quality of dignity seems to be a concept that is closely related to meaning through being as explored in this dissertation. An assumption of this study is that every person should have access to personal meaning which goes hand-in-hand with dignity. An outcome of this study is deeper appreciation for the relationship and interaction between meaning and dignity in a person’s life story.

Wong’s (1998; 2008) research on implicit meaning is reviewed. He developed the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP), which empirically identifies the sources from which one draws meaning in life. With the PMP and similar attempts at such categorization one gets a sense of the diversity from which meaning is created or uncovered by people. One also gets a sense that where meaning is found is a socially constructed concept; some areas are deemed meaningful and others are deemed void of meaning. The current study aims to explore this assumption by looking to see if participants often struggled with their sense of internal meaning because of cultural conflict.

In order to introduce the need for an analysis of narratives in meaning research, the more common empirical tools of meaning measurement are explored. Their benefits and shortcoming are highlighted. Narrative analysis is suggested as a methodology that can help to make up for the shortcomings of quantitative methods. The emphasis on narrative inquiry is similar to the work of Ganzevoort (1993; 1998a; 1998b), summarized above, who made a case for narrative theory in the field of pastoral counseling.
The next segment of the literature review turns its attention to concretizing the relationship between meaning and religion and meaning and spirituality. In an article by MacDonald & Holland (2003) the difficulty to operationalize spirituality is discussed in light of its interchangeable usage with religion. They emphasized that literature has shown that there is a difference between the relationship between spirituality and religion with psychological health. This would imply a separation between the two constructs. Throughout this paper, there is an attempt to use the terms religion and spirituality mindfully and respecting their distinctness as two separate though interrelated constructs.

Miller and Thoresen (2006) provided a basic distinction. They wrote that,

spirituality is an attribute of individuals. Religion, in contrast, is an organized social entity … religious factors focused more on prescribed beliefs, rituals, and practices as well as other social institutional features. Spiritual factors, on the other hand are concerned more with individual subjective experiences, sometimes shared with others. (p.6)

I will use the above as a guideline for the difference between religion and spirituality, though am simultaneously open to participant identification with either of the two constructs whether it fits into the separation of individual or organizational entity or not.

The common denominators between spirituality and meaning are discussed as transcendence and immersion into the experience (Firestone, Firestone, and Catlett, 2003). Religion is in itself a complete meaning framework (Silberman, 2005). Studies will be presented that explore the empirical relationship between meaning and spirituality and meaning and religion. As shall be seen, both religion and spirituality relate uniquely to meaning, thus religious identity and spiritual identity were considered distinctly in relation to the meaning of the participants.
Theoretically, spirituality and religion seem to be critical breaking points in how one approaches meaning. The distinction between a religious or spiritual world view versus an atheist world seems to cause a rift in existential philosophy, such as in the difference between Heidegger’s emptiness paradigm (Kaufmann, 1975) and Sartre’s (1956) being prior to existence paradigm (Lechte, 1994). These ideas will be discussed more fully in the next segment. Sufficient for now, it is my assumption that such a distinction might have translated into the existential psychology distinction between the presence and absence of spirituality/religion in one’s life as they relate to meaning. The literature review, and a major aim of the current study, aims to emphasize this distinction as it seems to be a core difference in the theories of meaning seeking (Frankl, 1984) versus meaning making (Yalom, 1980; Baumeister, 1991). In my analysis of the collected narratives, I looked at the different language that people use to talk about meaning. As I began this project, I had a proposed assumption of differences between the two terms, that participants will describe two different processes of meaning making and seeking, which have different values at different times in their lives, or play different roles for meaning fulfillment in the same experience.

Another related distinction that is central to this dissertation is the difference between meaning found through our actions, or meaning through doing, and meaning found through who we are, or meaning through being. The literature review blends together words of meaning psychologists, philosophers, and theologians to excavate and examine the concept of meaning through being that seems to be part of the fabric of the human experience. In contemporary research the construct of level of context has been studied which makes a distinction between a person using language of behavior (doing)
and a person using language of character (being) (Janoff-Bullman, 1992; Bauer & Bonnano, 2001) Studies have shown that integrative language was most highly correlated with improved well-being after trying times.

It is from this point that I spring forward into the study of meaning through narrative analysis. In this mode of inquiry, I am making it possible for every door to be open in how meaning is weaved into the stories that people tell. The third chapter, on methodology, will lay out the specific framework for implementing this study, as well as, explain how I managed to remain attuned to hearing the voices of the participants and not simply what I wanted to hear. Along with potential distinctions between meaning making and meaning seeking and distinctions between meaning through doing and meaning through being, the innate connection between narrative analysis and pastoral counseling research will be emphasized.
CHAPTER II
The Quest to Capture Meaning

The interdisciplinary construct of meaning is hard to capture. Philosophers associated with existentialism, such as Heidegger (1949) and Levinas (Lechte, 1995), and existential literature, such as Nausea by Sartre (1964), and Siddhartha by Hesse (1951) have struggled with the question of meaning in existence. Meaning has become a focus in psychology (Maslow, 1968; May, 1983; Frankl, 1962; Baumeister, 1991; Maddi, 1998; Wong, 1998) and nursing (Anderberg, Lepp, Berglund & Segesten, 2007). In the field of theology meaning has been spoken about by Tillich (1980; Fisher, 1976), Buber (1958), and Kushner (1981) in the West, and Hahn (1998), and Chödron (2003) in the East. It has become a key construct in Pastoral Counseling research (Dy-Liacco, Piedmont, Murray-Swank, Rodgerson, & Sherman, 2009). Meaning is also important in the fields of linguistics (Chomsky, 1990), cultural anthropology (Quinn, 1995; Jessor, Colby & Shweder, 1996), and education (Merriam & Heuer, 1996).

In 1961 the first issue of the Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry was published. Its founding editor, Adrian van Kaam, was a renaissance man in his own right, as his life blended philosophy, psychology, and the priesthood (Gillespie, 2001). The journal, discontinued in 2001, represented the diversity of disciplines in the study of existentialism and meaning (Iturrate, 1975; Bubalo, 1977; Frankl, 1986). Though the present exploration will focus on the psychological concept of meaning, there still exists complexity in the variety of its uses.

At times we speak of cosmic meaning, an ultimate belief about the meaning of existence, and at times we speak of the concept of personal meaning in an individual's
life, referred to as *terrestrial* meaning (Ebersole & Quiring, 1991). Meaning is both part of the fabric of human existence (Goodenough, 1966), and a constant creation of the individual as one encounters the world (Arciero & Guidano, 2000). In the research literature this idea of meaning is represented by different interchangeable terms. There is meaning-making (Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney, & Tsevat, 2006), purpose in life (Compton, 2000), understanding (Bohart & Tallman, 1999), and cohesion (Arciero & Guidano, 2000).

Meaning is at times viewed as associated with psychological well-being (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), and at times is thought of as a product or sign of a well functioning individual (R. Firestone, L. Firestone, & Catlett, 2003). Mascaro (2008) pooled various definitions together to define the meaning in life, or existential meaning. He saw meaning as a, “possession of a coherent framework for viewing life that provides a sense of purpose or direction, which, if lived with in accord, can bring about a sense of fulfillment” (p. 579). Mascaro admitted that even this definition does not capture every nuance by which people use the term meaning.

Meaning: A Link among Theology, Philosophy, and Psychology

As this dissertation deals with meaning in psychology it most naturally falls into the humanistic-existential branch of psychology. Existential psychology is rooted in existential philosophy which deals most importantly with the question of being (Cottingham, 1996). In the early twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, drawing on the previous writings of Nietzsche and Husserl (Kaufmann, 1975), brought the question of the human subjective experience of Being to the center of philosophical inquiry. Heidegger (1948) referred to human beings as *Dasein* to
distinguish them from other beings who do not have the capacity to investigate the presence of Being. A characteristic of *Dasein* is an awareness of Being in the self and in entities outside of the self (Cottingham, 1996). Being, according to Heidegger (1948), is the background with which all existence takes place. He argued that earlier philosophers had forgotten about Being because they were too concerned with what occurred within being. He warned that forgetting about Being is dangerous because it has allowed *Dasein* to think that they alone are the ultimate reason for existence, and therefore, they can live in any manner they choose without consequence. Heidegger reasoned that one can become aware of Being by examining people in their mode of being – observing people being people. The *Dasein* have a unique way of knowing in the world, a phenomenological knowing, which is one being’s interaction with another being in the world. Thus, Heidegger birthed a lineage of philosophy, existentialism, which honored phenomenological experience as a way to contextualize *Dasein* within a larger of framework of Being (Lemay & Pitts, 1996).

The emergence of existentialism has been described as an era of spiritual crisis (Tarnas, 1991),

> The anguish and alienation of twentieth-century life were brought to full articulation as the existentialist addressed the most fundamental, naked concerns of human existence – suffering and death, loneliness and dread, guilt, conflict, spiritual emptiness and ontological insecurity, the void of absolute values or universal contexts, the sense of cosmic absurdity, the frailty of human reason, the tragic impasse of the human condition. (p. 389)

In the more modern field of existential psychology the above list can be summarized into four main existential concerns of *death, loneliness, meaninglessness*, and *freedom* (Yalom, 1980). According to Tarnas (1991) these existential crises arose in modern society as a result of the inability to empirically prove the existence of God. This left the
Western person all alone in a world that has no meaning, where they are free to do anything they want on their inevitable journey to death.

One might conclude that a religious person, who affirms the existence of God, is immune from the struggle of an existential crisis. Religion is a system that can provide meaning and values in a believer’s life (Baumeister, 1991), as well as comfort in regards to mortality (Wong, 2008). The fact is though, that the religious person can experience an existential crisis just as powerfully and painfully as someone who does not accept the existence of God. An example of this is seen in the phenomenon of the dark night of the soul, in which a person may experience depression-like symptoms due to a perceived feeling of distance or abandonment from God (O’Conner, 2002).

For existential thinkers Being is not limited by human existence, in fact it is a ground from which human being-ness sprung (Cottingham, 1996; Lechte, 1994). According to the French existential philosopher Sartre (1956), an individual’s existence precedes one’s essence. He differed from Heidegger in that, while Heidegger concluded that we can never escape cultural rules, Sartre held fast to a radical idea of freedom where we are never bound to any set of rules (Lemay & Pitts, 1996). At first terrifying, an acceptance of freedom, which Sartre called, authenticity, can bring a feeling of liberation. For the purpose of this study, I proceed with Sartre’s view of the human condition as I assert that the presence of being can be a source of liberation rather than a limitation. Therefore I will not capitalize being, as Heidegger did, which perhaps suggests that Being locks us into ways of being as dictated by culture.

Building on Sartre’s perceptive of being, Levinas wrote about the inevitable and ever-present impersonal being that exists neither inside nor outside of the person (Lechte,
Levinas replaced the self as the center of the human experience with being. Therefore, in times of existential crisis, an individual always has being to fall back on whether they believe in God or not. The post-Sartre existentialists have given an alternative to the terror of radical freedom. The goal of the existentially focused therapist then is to reunite the client with the client’s world and to help the client discover something within to live for (May, 1983).

The concept of being as I will refer to in this study is further clarified by looking at Maslow’s (1968) concept of the “true nature” (p. 3), which was his foundational tenet for a psychology that is based on health and being. Maslow stated that at the core of each individual exists a “true nature” that is unchanging and most likely neutral or good. This core nature, if suppressed, can lead to dis-ease and illness. Maslow speaks of the “inner nature” as a very subtle and delicate part of the human experience. It can be overshadowed, but not destroyed. He posited that this inner core, which I am referring to as being, is the root of progress towards greater personal health and stability. With an understanding of how I will use the term being, I can turn to the concept of meaning in modern psychology which generally begins with Viktor Frankl (1962).

Frankl and the Primal Drive for Meaning

Frankl (1962) brought meaning to the attention of interdisciplinary scholars after his analysis of his experience surviving the Holocaust. According to Frankl, each individual possesses a ‘will to meaning,’ which is a primary motivation in one’s own life. This idea is in contrast to the theory that the primary motivator in a person’s life is to experience pleasure and avoid pain. Frankl wrote, “… man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life” (p. 136). Indeed, it is
meaning which has expanded the inner world of the human beyond feeling pleasure or pain into a complex system of emotions (Baumeister, 1991).

Frankl seemed to profoundly understand the primal origins of meaning which is supported by the evolutionary perspective exemplified by Klinger (1998). Klinger suggested that as motile beings, humans developed the drive to relentlessly seek out what they needed from their environment. This translated into goal fulfillment and a sense of purpose. Once a sense of purpose is in place an encounter with an unconditioned experience in the environment would have to be sorted out within the framework of this developed purpose. An experience may be seen as neutral and thus ignored, or might cause discomfort. The discomfort would then trigger a need to search for the relative meaning of the experience. What evolved then was a biologically-motivated, compulsive search for meaning. Hence, Klinger wrote,

The human brain cannot sustain purposeless living. It was not designed for that. Its systems are designed for purposive actions, and when blocked, they deteriorate, and the emotional feedback from idling those systems signals extreme discomfort and motivates the search for renewed purpose and hence meaning. (p.33)

More recent research suggested that the relationship between experiencing and searching for meaning is more complex, as there seems to be a moderation effect imposed by other subjective well-being variables (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008). Even so, Frankl (1962) has enlightening us to a primal drive for meaning which stems from the concern for survival.

Meaning and the Construction of Reality

In Baumeister’s (1991) comprehensive overview of the construct of meaning in psychology, Meanings in Life, he asserted that people receive their meaning from culture.
In his understanding, people do not create new meaning, but rather choose from what is available as meaningful into a coherent picture of personal meaning. Culture provides the larger context where meaning can be found. An example of this is that religion can be seen as a shared cultural meaning system. “Meaning,” Baumeister defined, “is a shared mental representation of possible relationships among things, events, and relationships … meaning connects things” (p.15).

According to Baumeister, the basic unit of meaning is a connection, whether real or symbolic. He equated the formation of a meaning of a word or concept with the meaning in life. Both language and life meaning can be understood in terms of the principles of constructivism (Arceiero & Guidano, 2000). According to the constructivist paradigm understanding of one’s world is intimately linked to the relationship between the individual and her or his experiences in the world. Truth and knowledge are constructed in an ongoing process as the cognizant being encounters its environment. This process of construction also takes place during identity development, where the individual constantly affirms one’s identity by organizing events into a coherent story (Ganzevoort, 1993). The constructivist perspective is important to the current study because it asserts that one can gain insight into the meaning formation processes of an individual through narratives.

According to Baumeister (1991) meaning has two functions that are interrelated. The first is to discern patterns in the environment. The second is to control the internal world of the self. The process of ascribing meaning creates labels for things that go beyond the bio-evolutionary distinction of pain and pleasure. It expands this dichotomy
into a world full of emotions, and helps to regulate and make sophisticated the human life in the environment.

In the current study, I aim to return to the idea of meaning as primal. I begin with the question, what is the raw experience of meaning in a person’s life and can it be utilized for maintaining psychological stability and health. As will be discussed, this kind of “bare-bones” meaning generally emerges when a person is stripped of their normal access to meaning. For example, people with chronic illness may tap into a hidden meaning reserve to supply them with hope (Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney, & Tsevat, 2006). In the current study I will demonstrate how people access this reserve in their daily lives.

May’s (1983) work entitled, Discovery of Being, provided a different glimpse into a possible understanding of survival through personal meaning. Echoing the existentialist voice, May wrote that each individual is constantly called to task to assert one’s existence against the anxiety of non-being. As Tillich (1980) spoke about the drive for self-affirmation, May (1983) too emphasized this self-affirmation process. Self-affirmation is the need to preserve one’s own centeredness. Survival then, in part, is the ongoing process of affirming one’s own existence, which is a function of personal meaning that is interwoven with the process of decision making (Maddi, 1998).

**Decision Making as Self-Affirming Meaning**

As I examine the relationship of meaning as a part of self-affirmation, the moment-to-moment shifts in the experience of meaning are drawn into focus. Maddi (1998) wrote that, “personal meaning derives from the individual decisions people make everyday” (p. 3). Decision making may be influenced by culture, social, and familial
norms. This can lead to an externally informed style of decision making, and thus to a meaning that is based on external factors alone. Individuals may also make decisions in a transcendent manner, where a person’s meaning expands or grows. Maddi spoke of this in terms of “choosing the past,” or, “choosing the future” (p. 6). When a person chooses in line with the past there is a lived experience of things always being the same. They are making decisions based on stagnant frames of meaning. This leads to feeling ontological guilt, the guilt of never knowing what could have been.

Alternatively, choosing the future is a decision to experience a new understanding, or new action. The individual lives in a way that is constantly integrating new experiences into their meaning scheme, which may include transcending the scheme altogether. The result of choosing the future is a feeling of ontological anxiety, which Maddi defined as the feeling of jumping into the unknown.

Maddi theorized that the meaning-based construct of hardiness can proactively buffer the effects of ontological anxiety. Hardiness is based on the idea that, “…personal meaning derives from the individual decisions people make everyday” (Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba, & Vaitkus, 2006, p. 3). Hardiness is composed of three acquired traits of commitment, control, and challenge. Commitment is seen as sustained engagement in one’s social sphere, despite any perceived dissonance between self and world. Control is the personal sense of an ability to accomplish various things in life. Challenge is the ability to see change as interesting and not chaotic. In healthy circumstances these qualities are acquired in one’s youth. With hardiness in place one is able to sustain a sense of meaning without the terror of an unknown future.
Personal Goals as Criteria for Meaning in Life

There was a wave of meaning research that seemed to place purpose in life, or goal orientation at its focus. Emmons (2003), for example, looked at meaning in people’s lives in terms of pursuit of personally significant goals. A person is engaged in a meaningful life when they are seeking to fulfill self-defined goals. He wrote, “Development of goals that allow for a greater sense of purpose in life is one of the cornerstones of well-being ...” (p. 106). Emmons reminded the reader that meaning in life is associated with positive function, and a lack of meaning has shown to be associated with psychological distress and pathology.

Through three separate research studies, which span qualitative and quantitative methodologies, Emmons mapped out four areas in people’s lives where meaning is sought. These are: Work, Intimacy, Spirituality, and Transcendence. Transcendence is explained as generativity, wanting to leave something behind for the future, and not transcendence in the spiritual sense. He compared these life areas to the areas in which goal themes are usually created. In seeking goals people aim for goals of intimacy, spirituality, generativity, and power. Of the four goal themes, goals for power are associated with higher levels of reported negative affect. In contrast to Baumeister (1991) who stated that relationship and connection are the units of meaning, Emmons (2003) suggested that personal goals are the units of a meaningful life. He also seemed to stress that it is not the attainment of goals that creates meaning, rather the pursuit of them.

Related to this discussion about meaning through goal seeking is happiness pursuit. The research of Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi (2008) has shown that one must engage in meaningful actions in order to feel a sense of meaning in their life. The
experience of meaning due to predetermined meaningful activities perhaps suggested that separate from the action is the attribution of meaning that already exists within the person. More on this exploration of implicit meaning will be explored in the work of Wong (1998a; 1998b). In their study about eudaimonic, or meaning centered, pursuit of the good life, Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi (2008) stated that goal pursuit directed at intrinsically meaningful goals that are in line with one’s inner most values, or provide autonomy, competence, or relatedness contributed more to well-being than goal-directed behavior that was directed purely by pleasure, or hedonistic concerns. It seems that purpose, in the concept of happiness, is reached by identifying and persevering at one’s valued goals. The perseverance suggested means putting in a great deal of effort in an autonomous way and engenders a sense of competence as well. The authors’ results seem to point at a blending of two meaning-based concepts of Purpose in Life (Crambaugh & Maholick, 1964) and Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, 1979), both of which will be described in detail below.

The above review of eudaimonic happiness is relevant to the current study because it suggested that there is more to meaning in life than the pursuit of goals, as suggested by Emmons (2003). There must be an established meaning that imbibes the goal and the pursuit of that goal must be seen as meaningful. Their results suggested that the unit of meaning is not a goal, but rather a connection between the being from which meaning extends and one’s environment. A relationship indeed, as Baumeister (1991) explained; the most basic of relationships. An example of this might be a person who is ultimately seeking love. When they are in a relationship they may feel fulfilled and when not in a relationship they may feel unfulfilled. It is possible though that when not in a
relationship the person can stop looking for love, an act of doing, and find fulfillment that they are already loved by their family and God. This is an assertion of the meaning that is rooted in their being. This realization might lessen the burden of the need for pursuit.

It is clear from Emmons’ (2003) work that with the perspective of purpose, all avenues of meaning seeking can be reduced to areas where goals may be fulfilled. It is an assumption of this study that this is a limiting and dangerous perspective. Identifying and striving for goals is only one need of meaning (Baumeister, 1991), and there is more to meaning than just what one does (Frankl, 1984; Wong, 2008). Though there are empirical measures which categorize where one draws meaning from (Ebersole, 1998; Wong, 1998), there seems to still be a danger for a dominating perspective that meaning is justifiable through actions and pursuits only. The current study aims at examining the cultural rules of what is accepted as experiencing meaning. It is an assumption of this study that people today tend to downplay the meaning that is available through experience and identity unless they are stripped of their ability to create meaning through progress.

The Positive Meaning Perspective -- Sense of Coherence

While Frankl’s (1962) theory of meaning originally dominated the empirical approach to meaning, it is not the only theory available. Frankl’s theory ultimately was about a new way of understanding pathology. According to Frankl, a lack of meaning led to a unique type of psychological distress. As a result, the measurement scale based on his theory, the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), was developed to predict and diagnose meaning-based pathology, such as existential anxiety. Antonovsky
(1979) introduced meaning in a new light; meaning that is at the core of health rather than pathology.

The sense of coherence (SOC) is a construct that came out of the world of medicine in the 1970’s and 80’s, as part of a challenge to the pathogenic approach to medicine which focused on the origins of disease, and a healthy or sick person dichotomy (Antonovsky, 1979). An alternative, salutogenic orientation, was introduced that focused on the origin of health, and a healthy to unhealthy, or health-ease to dis-ease continuum.

“The implications are that with pathogenesis, only a small number of people are examined at a given time, whereas with salutogenesis the total population becomes the subject of study” (Korotkov, 1998, p. 53). In the salutogenic continuum one never reaches the extreme of healthy or sick, but is pushed toward one end of the spectrum by a multitude of internal and external factors.

Antonovsky (1979), who coined the term salutogenesis, was fascinated by the fact that given the enormous amount of ways one can become ill, there were so many people living healthy lives. He claimed that people guarded against entropy by gathering generalized resistance resources (GRR). Examples of GRR are social support, water, and personal optimism. Antonovsky identified the SOC as a construct that highly correlated with measures of overall health and acted as a mediator between other resource variables and overall health. SOC was conceptualized as a determining factor where a person might land on the healthy to unhealthy continuum. Antonovsky described SOC as,

a global orientation that expresses the extent that one has a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic, feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work as well as can reasonably be expected. (p. 132)
Simply put, SOC is the tendency of an individual to view one’s life as ordered, predictable, and manageable (Antonovsky, 2001).

The SOC construct was separated into three variables: (1) comprehensibility, (2) manageability, and (3) meaningfulness. Comprehensibility is the sense that the world is ordered and predictable, and that it makes cognitive sense. Manageability speaks to the idea that one has the needed resources to cope with the demands of life. Meaningfulness is the degree, “to which the world makes emotional sense and that the demands of life are perceived as being worthy of energy investment and commitment” (Kortokov, 1998, p. 55). The importance of meaningfulness is that it ensures long-lasting coping by motivating the other two factors and moving the GRR from potential to actual utilization.

Constructs, such as SOC (Antonovsky, 1979) and hardiness (Maddi, 1998), place meaning at the center of personality, instead of something that is created by personality. Meaning becomes a tool that is used to create an inner sense of harmony and core resilience. Whether meaning is bestowed upon us by a Higher Power or not is irrelevant. In a sense, one might think of personal meaning as language. We are born with the capacity for both and have the ability throughout life to access deeper levels of both for our benefit and the benefit of our societies (Goolishian & Anderson, 1987). Baumeister (1991) also helped to expand on the original conceptualization of meaning.

*Baumeister’s Four Needs of Meaning and Human Dignity*

Baumeister (1991) suggested four universal needs of meaning that seem to be a stabilizing recipe for the individual. They are *purpose, value, efficacy,* and *self-worth.* He defined *purpose* as the need to interpret present actions as contributing to some future or possible state. It is composed of an extrinsic level of goal-direction and an intrinsic state...
of fulfillment. Baumeister suggested that fulfillment is a state of being happy about achieving a goal. *Value*, or justification, asserts that actions are right and good. This need is the basis for morality and social justice. *Efficacy* is having a sense of control over events, even if this control is illusory. It also is seen in the need to feel capable. Efficacy seems to be related to two ingredients of SOC, comprehensibility and manageability, the sense that the world is predictable and that one has the ability to cope (Korotkov, 1998).

The final need of meaning in Baumeister’s (1991) conception is *self-worth*. It is a sense that an individual’s life has a positive significance and a claim on self-respect and respect from others. Baumeister wrote that the need of self-worth is linked to the need for superiority which must be constantly renegotiated (p.45). He explored the lack of self-worth as seen in the history of slaves in America. Even the lowest members of society created a hierarchy of superiority, house slaves over field slaves, for example, in order to maintain a sense of self-worth.

It seems to me that equating self-worth with a need for superiority does not capture the fullness of this particular need. In their qualitative study on the experience of homeless people, Miller & Keys (2001) found that self-worth was related to having dignity. They identified eight criteria that facilitated a feeling of dignity in the interviewee. These were: (1) feeling cared for, (2) being treated as an individual, (3) receiving personalized care, (4) belonging to a group, (5) availability of resources to meet basic needs, (6) availability of resources to meet needs of self-sufficiency, (7) access to opportunities in the community, and (8) having a role. Most of the participants in their study reported an outcome of increased self-worth when the above eight criteria were present. On the other hand when events occurred that undermined dignity, participants
reported a decrease in feelings of self-worth. For example, some stated feeling, “less than a person,” or, “like I am nothing” (p. 347). One can hear Baumeister’s four needs echoed in those events which validated a sense of dignity for these participants.

In addition to studies with the homeless population, the concept of dignity and its impact on meaning in life has been explored mainly in the dying and the elderly. (Blanchard, Duarte, & Munsch, 2000; Anderberg, Lepp, Berglund, & Segesten, 2007; Hughes, Gudmundsdottir, & Davies, 2007). It would appear that when a person can no longer escape the reality of mortality, society then affirms their basic right to human dignity that each of its members has. This study will address the need and benefit of highlighting and affirming the right to dignity in any client that seems to be struggling in the area of personal meaning as an issue of social justice.

Mascaro & Rosen (2008) divided existential meaning as referred to by Frankl (1962) into three parts. These are personal meaning, implicit meaning, and spiritual meaning. Personal meaning, as defined as a sense of purpose and coherence, has been discussed above. Implicit meaning seems to provide entry into the exploration of meaning through narrative analysis and will be discussed in further detail in the next section. Spiritual meaning will be discussed below as well.

*Implicit Meaning -- What Gives Us Meaning?*

Implicit meaning refers to a person engaging in the type of behaviors that others would find meaningful. It is the laypersons’ understanding of what is meaningful, or the prototypical structure of meaning (Wong, 1998a; 1998b). Wong’s exploration of implicit meaning lead him towards the development of the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP).
The PMP is a 57-item, Likert format self-report inventory that measures the extent to which individuals engage in seven specific areas as part of their meaning framework. Wong found that the PMP and its seven sub-scales significantly related to explicit measures of meaning (i.e., SOC and PIL), and measures of perceived and psychological well-being. The seven sub-scales are, (1) achievement and goal striving (agency), (2) intimacy and family (love), (3) relationships (community), (4) self-transcendence (larger cause), (5) religion (spirituality), (6) self-acceptance (maturity), and, (7) fair treatment (justice and morality). Measure of physical well-being correlated with achievement, fulfillment, and self-transcendence subscales. A strong negative relationship was found between depression measures and all the PMP subscales except for Relationship and Self-acceptance. Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey (2004) found that the PMP was positively associated with the Life Regard Index (Battista and Almond, 1973) and the Spiritual Meaning Scale (Mascaro et al., 2004). (Both of these scales will be discussed below.)

Wong (1998a; 1998b) developed the PMP by mixed methodology. He asked a diverse sample of 60 participants to describe their personal conception of what makes an ideally meaningful life. Wong argued that asking such an open ended question about ideals would free participants from their personal challenges in meaning seeking and allow for a broader spectrum of answers. While some responded in list form, other responded in essay form and Wong gathered a wealth of data from his exploration. The data yielded a list of 102 items that were identified as attributes to the ideal meaningful life. These included integrated characterological (being) and behavior-based (doing) attributes, such as, “Has zest for life,” “Has a good family life,” “Is at peace with God,”
“Likes challenges,” Believes that human life is governed by moral law,” “Strives to make this world a better place,” “Has talents,” “Feels secure,” “Has an integrated personality,” “Has a purpose and direction in life,” and “Accepts what cannot be changed” (pp. 135 – 137). Wong concluded that, “meaning seeking depends not only on what a person thinks or does, but also on who the person is” (p.113). This dissertation study builds on Wong’s focus by using an open-ended approach to meaning which allows for an implicit exploration of meaning that keeps personal history and socio-cultural experiences intact. Also, the telling of stories will highlight the interplay of characterological and behavioral-based statements more so than Wong’s method of simply asking for a description of meaning.

Wong created the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) by using the results from his qualitative study to fuel quantitative study. He reduced the original 102 items down to 59 items after participants from different age groups rated the items according to their own implicit understanding of meaning. The remaining items were subjected to a factor analysis which yielded a 9 factor solution. In subsequent studies, reported in the same article, a 7 factor solution was decided upon.

Jaarsma et al (2007) conducted a study in which they gave a Dutch translation of the PMP to 294 Dutch cancer patients, age 18 years and older. The authors aimed to see the factor break down for the PMP in a Dutch sample, and also looked at correlations between PMP factor scores and positive (innerness and posttraumatic growth) and negative (anxiety and depression) affect scores, and scores on the five-factor model (FFM) of personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism). Results showed five factors in the Dutch sample. These were relation with
Holistic Content Approach

God, dedication to life, fairness of life, goal-orientedness, and relation with other people.

Scores on the PMP correlated positively with scores of innerness and posttraumatic growth. Innerness is a spirituality factor that looks at the process for discovering wholeness. PMP scores showed a negative correlation to measures of anxiety and depression. As for personality factors, PMP scores correlated positively with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and only slightly to openness. The PMP factor of religion did not appear to be related at all to personality measurements. Ali, Oatley, & Toner (2002) used qualitative methodology similarly to Wong to explore where people draw meaning from, and specifically how an interaction with the world translates into the experience of meaning.

Ali, Oatley, & Toner (2002) investigated life stress, self-silencing, and domains of meaning related to women’s depression. From a pilot study they learned that participants’ responses about primary domains of meaning were amenable to a data analysis through systematic content analysis. They arrived at seven categories which they split into two larger themes. These themes were relational and self-nurturing. The relational theme included friendships, family, and intimate relationships categories. The theme of self-nurturing included career, exercise, creative expression, and spirituality categories. With empirical methodology, the authors revealed that stressors related to their primary source of meaning were associated with major depression. Baum & Stewart (1990) conducted a similar study looking at meaningful events over age. They found that there were no significant differences in what was seen as meaningful in different age groups.

Theories about meaning span broader than the why’s and what’s of meaning. Models have been created to understand how one goes about forming meaning in life and
how one maintains a sense of meaning in their life. An exemplary model that has subsequently been used to explore the relationship between meaning and religion/spirituality is the Park & Folkman (1997) Model of Global and Situational Meaning.

**Meaning Formation**

Park & Folkman (1997) developed their Model of Global and Situational Meaning in order to conceptualize how stress impacts a complex understanding of meaning. The authors noted that there are conflicting studies that show presence of meaning as being both negatively (Clark, Henry, & Taylor, 1991; Frazier & Schauben, 1994) and positively (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Affleck, Tennen, & Gershman, 1985) associated with meaning making. Their model aimed to understand these discrepancies in the research. Meaning is simply defined as referring to perception of significance (Park & Folkman, 1997), and it is divided into two categories: *global* and *situational* meaning.

Global meaning refers to the individual's sustained understanding of the past and present, and expectations about the future. Two important components of global meaning are an individual’s assumption about order and a motivational element which includes goals and purpose. Assumptions about order include beliefs about the world, beliefs about the self, and beliefs about the self in the world. Global meaning is characterized by stability, optimism, and personal relevance.

The authors identified religion as a typical example of global meaning. Religion is often central to an individual’s life meaning, it provides a context from which one makes sense of life events, it provides a variety of coping mechanisms for dealing with stressful
situations, and religion may be modified when a person is faced with a traumatic experience. Though, under normal circumstances, people are more likely to keep their religious beliefs stable than to make a change.

Situational meaning refers to an interaction that occurs between the person’s global meaning and an encounter her or his environment. Park & Folkman wrote about a person-environment transaction that must be appraised by the individual. According to their model, when a situation is initially appraised as stressful, it means that there is a conflict between global and situational meanings. A second appraisal step is then taken, whereby a person, informed by their global meaning, will identify relevant coping strategies. This begins the process known as search for meaning.

Throughout life, as different experiences are had, a person is faced with situational meaning which can either support or challenge their global meaning. When a situational meaning conflicts with global meaning a person may experience a crisis as they struggle to make sense of their current experience. This struggle may result in either changing the beliefs and goals that make up their global meaning or they may reappraise the situational meaning to reduce its incongruence with their global meaning. If neither of these occurs, a person may enter the stage of rumination. Rumination is often associated with poorer adjustment and depression.

In their qualitative narrative analysis, Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney & Tsevat (2006) collected stories of 19 men and women living with HIV or AIDS who identified with having a spiritual or religious framework for coping with their situation. The researchers were interested in seeing if there was any connection between the recently higher levels of life satisfaction reported in the HIV/AIDS community with
spiritually/religiously informed frameworks of meaning making. They looked at current versus lifelong religious/spiritual involvements and orientations as they impacted people living with HIV or AIDS.

The authors used the Park & Folkam (1997) model in order to examine how people living with HIV/AIDS who have different spiritual/religious orientations cope with the challenge to meaning that having HIV/AIDS created for them. The authors (Jacobson et al., 2006) used Pargament’s theory of religious coping style (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) in order to categorize participants into religious coping strategy groups. Their results confirmed that stressful situations in life are stressful because they challenge a person’s global meaning. Deferring believers, who give it all up to God, seemed to not find a conflict between their health status and their global meaning. Collaborative believes, who see themselves are partners with God, resolved the conflict between situational and global meaning by shifting their global meaning. For example, one participant found a less traditional spiritual path which was more congruent with his specific life issues. The spiritual/religious seeker, who identify as spiritual or religious though feel unfulfilled, had not reached a resolution between global and situational meaning and seemed to be in the rumination phase of the Park & Folkman (1997) model. The final group, the self-directing believers, did not rely on a benevolent God in their spiritual view. They were able to find congruence between global and situational meaning frameworks without much change. This is because in their view challenges are a part of life.

The use of narratives to explore religious coping styles proved very fruitful. The authors were able to dive into the diversity of how religion and spirituality interacts with
meaning-making in order to facilitate coping in stressful situations. The authors added validity to the Park & Folkman (1997) model and to Pargament’s theory of religious coping styles (Pargament et al., 1998). It is obvious that their results went deeper than if the person was religious or not, and if the person had meaning or not. Their study provided full-bodied information for anyone working with spiritual or religious patients living with HIV or AIDS.

Plattner & Meiring (2006) also used the Park & Folkman (1997) model to organize their results in a study that looked at the meaning-making based coping process of 10 Namibian people infected with HIV. Their results showed that all the participants accepted their HIV status and the acceptance played a role in their coping strategy. Most of the participants felt as if they were responsible for contracting HIV, and so felt as if they deserved the virus. This coping style gave them a sense of control over their lives. Their participants reported that religion became important in their lives when they became infected with HIV. Religion reportedly gave their HIV status more meaning and infused their experience with a sense of purpose and hope that a good outcome was inevitable. My study too will use a qualitative approach to exploring meaning and I will use the phenomenological experience of meaning as interpreted from the stories to expand upon the Park & Folkman (1997) model.

Thus far, I have covered some of the major meaning theorists in the discipline of modern psychology. I offer the following as a summary for how I will understand meaning in this study. Meaning can be conceptualized as stemming from what one does and who one is. Meaning is a personal impression of how the individual sees and expresses oneself in the world. Personal meaning is diverse within and between people,
and through the dynamics of meaning the static essential being of the individual is expressed. Taken together one gets a sense of the complexity to capture meaning in one scale or one questionnaire. Following is a survey of the more popular measurements of meaning. This is an important step leading up to the current study as I hope to fill a gap that exists when looking at meaning through a purely empirical lens.

Measuring Personal Meaning

There have been several instruments that have been developed in order to measure meaning. The first scale was developed to capture Frankl’s (1962) original understanding of meaning (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). As will be explored, this scale, while successful on certain accounts, seemed to fail in ultimately capturing the fullness of meaning. Subsequently, other measures were developed that took a narrowed focus on meaning. The common practice in recent studies is to use a variety of meaning measurements in order to capture the fullness of the construct (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988b; King, Hicks, Krull, & Del Gaiso, 2006; Mascaro & Rosen, 2008).

Purpose in Life Test

The Purpose in Life (PIL) test was developed by Crumbaugh & Maholick (1964) in order to measure the degree to which one experiences their life as meaningful – the construct expounded by Frankl (1962) called, ‘will to meaning.’ It is a 20-item scale with split-half reliabilities reported as high as .90 (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), and test-retest coefficients of .83 (Meier & Edwards, 1974). The test was created to quantify noogenic anxiety in a person’s life as a way that would uniquely be associated with pathology. The PIL was created as a way to prove that meaninglessness was a predictor of psychological dysfunction. Initial and subsequent results found a significant difference
between normal and pathological groups (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964; Crumbaugh, 1968; Crumbaugh, 1972; Reker & Cousins, 1979; Zeitchik, 2001).

Zeitchick (2001) sought to provide clear proof for the PIL’s validity by employing both convergent and divergent means. In his study, the PIL was administered to a sample of 107 people, over half being Orthodox Jews. In order to make a case for convergent validity the Life Regard Index (LRI), Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS), and Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWB) were administered as well. The LRI measures the extent to which one has discovered a life framework and the extent to which one has fulfilled this framework. The LGS measures the extent to which one is committed to impacting their environment and leaving something to be remembered by after their death. The SWB looks at meaning through spiritual or religious means and measures perceived spiritual or existential fulfillment. For divergent validity a measure of self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and depressed mood scales were administered.

When controlling for demographics, results yielded strong positive correlations between the PIL and the positive fulfillment subscale of the LRI, and the Generativity Scale. There was no significant correlation found between SWB and PIL. The PIL correlated positively with the measures of self-esteem, \( r = .70 \) and life satisfaction, \( r = .64 \). The PIL had a significant negative correlation with depression, \( r = -.71 \). When controlling for self-esteem, depression, and life satisfaction, the relationship between the PIL with the positive fulfillment subscale of the LRI and LGS remained significant. A confirmatory Principle Components factor analysis was done to see if Frankl’s three meaning components (creativity, experience, and attitude) were reflected in the data. The author found 3 significant factors. While two of the factors seemed to correspond to the
experiential and attitudinal parts of meaning, the third factor seemed to be more about control than creativity. The two factors that corresponded to experience and attitude had positive correlations with the subscale of the LRI and the LGS.

When looking at demographic difference, the author found that single participants had lower PIL scores than married participants. Lower income participants scored lower than higher income participants. Older participants scored higher than younger participants. On average, the more religious a participant, the higher their PIL score.

According to Chamberlain and Zika (1988a) studies have demonstrated significant relationships between PIL scores and social attitudes, values, drug involvement, imprisonment, depression, weltanschauung (comprehensive worldview), and subjective well-being.

The PIL has shown significant positive correlates with psychological well being and positive affect, and a significant negative correlation to psychological distress and negative affect (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). In one early study Crumbaugh (1968) found that people with the diagnosis of schizophrenia scored well on the PIL and that the only correlated category of pathology on the MMPI with the PIL was depression.

There is disagreement among literature as to how many factors are represented by the PIL. Yalom (1980) suggests that the 20-items of the scale relate to life meaning, life satisfaction, freedom, fear of death, suicide, and how worthwhile one perceives one’s life to be. More recently, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted by Marsh et al. (2003) looking at PIL scores of alcohol drinkers not in treatment and those in treatment. For both populations a one dimension solution was deemed best fit, though leaving out the following 3 items: retirement, fear of death, and people’s freedom to make choices. The
authors concluded that the one factor represented a broad range of related facets of meaning, which included satisfaction with daily life, whether there are clear goals in life, sense of overall meaning in life, sense of personal responsibility, and sense of control. This was similar to the results obtained by Chamberlain & Zika (1988a), Harlowe, Newcomb, & Bentler (1988) and Dale (2003).

Schulenberg & Melton (in print) performed a confirmatory factor analysis, which supported the 2-Factor Model of Morgan & Farsides (in print). In this model the PIL is seen as representing two distinct factors: existing life and purposeful life. Further study showed that by taking the 3 purposeful life items, and adding to them a forth item that asks specifically about overall meaning in life, that previously did not load on any factor, a reliable short form PIL is created. This decreases the 20-item scale to a 4-item scale that measures only purposeful living.

**Life Regard Index**

Battista and Almond (1973) developed the Life Regard Index (LRI) to overcome some difficulties they identified in PIL. As the PIL was a scale to assess the broad range of meaning in life, the LRI is a 28-item measure which is designed to measure a sub-construct only, that of personal meaning (Mascaro et al, 2008). The LRI is divided into two equal sub-scales, framework (Fr) and fulfillment (Fu). Each sub-scale contains a total of fourteen items, 7-positively worded and 7-negatively worded items. The LRI-Fr sub-scale contains items which relate to having a framework, perspective, or life-goals from which meaning can be derived. The LRI-Fu sub-scale assesses the degree to which the framework or life-goals are being fulfilled (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988a).
The LRI framework, within different populations has shown correlations that indicate its association with overall mental health, positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988b; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992); anxiety and depression (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992; Debats, 1990; Debats et al., 1993); happiness (Debats, 1990; Debats et al., 1993; Debats, 1996; Scanell, Allen,&Burton, 2002); emotional dyscontrol and psychological well–being (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992); elation (Dabats, 1990); spiritual well–being (Harris & Standard, 2001; Scannell et al., 2002); hopelessness (Harris & Standard, 2001); and general psychological distress (Debats, 1996). In addition to this, the LRI framework subscale has shown incremental validity over the Five Factor Model of personality (Mascaro et al., 2004). Two longitudinal studies have been conducted in which results suggested that the LRI–framework may predict levels of depression and hope (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005) and levels of happiness and general psychological distress (Debats, 1996).

Mascaro et al. (2008) stated that a criticism of the LRI is that its fulfillment scale is actually looking at life satisfaction. Therefore, the scale cannot be used to predict outcome variables that measure feeling good or bad, because in a sense that is what it does. It may be seen as a confounding factor when predicting affect variables.

*Sense of Coherence Scale*

The SOC scale is a 29-item scale. It was developed using samples from Israel, the United States, and Canada. Cronbach alpha reliability scores have been reported in the range of .82 to .95 (Antonovsky, 1979), with test-retest reliability reported as .63 (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988a). The scale is composed of three subscales to measure the three components of SOC. The comprehensibility subscale consists of 11 items and it
assesses the extent to which an individual views one’s world as orderly, predictable, and explicable. The manageability subscale consists of 10 items and it looks at the degree to which challenges encountered are perceived to be able to be met. The final subscale, meaningfulness, is composed of 8-items and it measures the degree to which life is viewed as important and challenges worthy of commitment. In a study conducted by Chamberlain & Zika (1988a) with a sample of mothers of young children, a Principle Components factor analysis was executed with the SOC. Their findings did not support a three factor model, but rather a seven factor model. The meaningful items split on two separate factors, where one was characterized by enthusiasm for life, and the second by purpose in life. The other five factors seemed to be mostly a mixture of items from the other two subscales. Contradictory to their results, Flannery Jr., Perry, Penk & Flannery (1994) yielded results from a factor analysis that showed three clear factors, with the subscale meaningfulness, accounting for 25% of explained variance, as compared to 14% explained by the other two subscales. Their sample consisted of mostly White middle class men and women, mean age of 27 years old, attending a night college. Antonovsky (1979) warned that since the scale was developed as a global measure it is not legitimate for researchers to calculate and rely on scores for the independent sub constructs. Rather, researchers are urged to develop subscales for comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness that have relatively low intercorrelations.

The SOC has shown statistically positive associations with age, family closeness and communication (Antonovsky, 2001). It has shown negative associations with trait anxiety in an adolescent sample, measures of life stress in an adult sample, psychological distress, depression, locus of control, and social support. The SOC has yielded similar
results despite cultural and economic social status differences (Bowman, 1996). Scores on the SOC showed no significant difference between a control population and a Pentecostal sample, suggesting the applicability of the scale to people with a religious orientation (Langius & Björvell, 2001). While all three subscales of the SOC have shown a significant negative correlation to affective symptoms of psychopathology, positive symptoms correlate with only two of the scales, comprehensibility and manageability, and negative symptoms with none of the scales. Bengtsson-Tops & Brunt (2005) suggested that clinicians proceed with caution when using the SOC to predict psychopathology.

**Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ)**

Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler (2006) developed the MLQ to address the specific reflections on meaning in life that arise from a humanistic perspective. They wanted an improved scale that looked at meaning as a positive variable that promotes growth, rather than a construct that simply decreases symptoms. The authors summarized the criticisms of the widely used meaning scales (PIL, LRI, and SOC) and stated that they muddle the understanding of the construct of meaning. The PIL is associated with potentially confounding variables, such as suicidality, and has shown positive associations with negative affect. They claimed that SOC can be classified as a coping disposition measure. The developers of the MLQ define meaning as, “as the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence. This definition represents an effort to encompass all of the major definitions of meaning and allows respondents to use their own criteria for meaning” (p. 81). The MLQ, according to the authors, has untangled the
construct of meaning from the confounding factors of depression, anxiety, religion, and life satisfaction.

The MLQ is a 10-item scale that is composed of two relatively orthogonal, 5-item subscales, presence (MLQ-P) and search (MLQ-S). The present subscale measures a subjective sense that one’s life is meaningful. The search subscale measures the drive and focus on finding meaning in one’s life. Internal consistency of both subscales have been evaluated with alphas equaling .86 - .88. The independence of the presence and search for meaning subscales leave open the possibility for people who already have meaning in life that continue to search for a higher meaning or for additional sources of meaning. In other words, the MLQ provided empirical evidence that a search for meaning is not always elicited by a lack of meaning (Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006).

Meaning in Life Depth (MILD)

Ebersole (1998), similar to Wong (1998a; 1998b), went beyond the question of, *is meaning present of not?* In his article he asked the question what are some of the prevalent sources of meaning in society. And then going one step further than Wong, he asked are these experiences of meaning profound or shallow. Ebersole (1998) claimed that while research has shown that most people have experienced meaninglessness in their lives, the large majority answer affirmatively to the question of having personal meaning in the moment. In order to find out about the content of people’s meaning, Ebersole and colleagues conducted a number of studies with various samples of different ages that asked participants to write about their central personal meaning and to give an example. (For example see Devogler & Ebersole, 1981.) Eventually, the MILD was developed (Ebersole & Quiring, 1991.) The following eight categories were identified as
central to an individual’s life meaning across age differences, (1) relationships, (2) service, (3) belief, (4) obtaining, (5) growth, (6) health, (7) life work, and, (8) pleasure. In general, a ninth category, miscellaneous accounted for 5% of responses.

When looking at depth of meaning, the authors acknowledged that the Purpose in Life (PIL) test (Crambaugh & Maholick, 1969) was developed for measuring the intensity of meaning in life. The PIL has received criticism as it is a self-report measure. The technique of Ebersole (1998) splits the responsibility of evaluation between the participant and an outside rater. Outside raters were given the writing sample of each participant and judged its depth on a 5-point scale (Ebersole & Quiring, 1991). A meaning was rated deeper when: (1) the central meaning is discussed with more complexity and with a sense of individuality, and/or, (2) the meaning and example are specific, concrete, and significant. A meaning was rated as more shallow if it was either new or been held for a while without signs of development. The outside raters were urged to judge for themselves and not to accept the rating for the participant. If the rater was confused or unsure, or if no example was given or seemed insignificant a rating would not be higher than the middle category. The outside raters had the advantage of a frame of reference as they were reading the examples of all the people in the sample. This was a perspective that was lacking for the participants themselves. Ebersole addressed the limitations of this method in that high interrater reliability might have suggested that the outside raters had similar values. Also there were questions whether younger people can accurately assess older people’s meanings for depth and vice-versa. Practically, Ebersole used his research to inspire the question of how do American’s go about learning how to
construct deeper levels of meaning. He stated that it is a skill that must be learned so that into old age, people can experience a significant and profound meaning to their life.

Shortcomings of the PIL and other Empirical Measures of Meaning

Zeitchik (2001) pointed out two problems that have plagued research on the relationship between mental health and personal meaning. These issues are insufficient discriminant validity and a lack of longitudinal analysis. Of the PIL, Mascaro et al. (2004) critiqued that while data supported a relationship with a number of outcome variables, these studies remain un-interpretable as there is a lack of clarity as to what the PIL is actually measuring. This is supported, the authors suggested, by a complex and inconsistent factor structure, a vague definition of existential meaning, and a lack of discriminant and convergent validity.

While there is a strong focus in meaning literature on goal directed behavior (Emmons, 2003), there are other facets to meaning that are associated more with the quality of spiritual transcendence (Firestone, Firestone, and Catlett, 2003). Given the connection with the spiritual, the PIL might be lacking in measuring an important dimension of meaning. There is currently no item in the PIL that asks about spirituality. Interestingly enough, the PIL seems to have found its way into the realm of spiritual measurement even if that was not its original intent. (Robinson, Cranford, Webb & Brower, 2007).

The PIL measures a sense of one feeling fulfilled in their life and that they have invested interest in creativity. There seems to be a significant portion that is left out from Frankl’s theory on meaning. There seems to be no acknowledgment of Frankl’s connection between the spiritual and personal meaning within the scale items themselves.
Perhaps this is because measuring spirituality was not thought as empirically possible, though now with the development of the Spiritual Meaning Scale (Mascaro, Rosen, & Morey, 2004), and other instruments that integrate measurements of religiosity and spirituality, there seems to be a paradigm shift taking place.

Zeitchik (2001) concluded that only two of the four needs for meaning are represented in the PIL. In contemporary thought meaning is based on purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth, (Baumeister, 1991). While the PIL seems to look at purpose and value, it seems to ignore efficacy and self-worth (Zeitchik, 2001). It is curious that Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964) named the test Purpose in Life, seemingly representing only a sliver of the total meaning picture. Zeitchik (2001) made the point that although Frankl’s ‘will to meaning,’ consisted of creative, experiential, and attitudinal components, the PIL seems to lump these altogether and makes no distinction between its components.

Ali, Oatley, & Toner (2002) explained the reason why they saw fit to use qualitative methodology in exploring meaning.

A second methodological refinement involves placing a primacy on a less reductionistic and more contextualized approach to the measurement of key constructs. This approach can enable us to uncover those aspects of the individual’s life that are most meaningful from the participant’s own perspective, rather than adopting an over-reliance on a priori quantification of variables. While the ease of administering traditional self-report measures is an advantage of the strictly quantitative approach, such scales are limited in their ability to take into account the participant’s social context … It can also counter the assumption that all participants in a given study must either fit exactly into a priori categories or be eliminated from key analyses. (p. 670)

As discussed above, Steger et al. (2006) have developed a scale that seems to address the issues of unstable factor structures and confounding factors. The MLQ has pulled apart presence of meaning and search for meaning, and has begun to tap into the
wide range of how a search for meaning might be initiated and played out. It is an assumption of the current study, based on previous works of narrative inquiry (Leiblich, 1998), that through looking at stories there is insight to be gained about the search for meaning, as two possible processes of seeking or creating meaning, and composed of both doing and being components. Through the interpretations of the collected narratives, I will focus in on the advancements to understanding personal meaning that are provided by qualitative study. I assert that given the shortcomings of empirical research on grasping the fullness of meaning, it is worthwhile to take a different approach to explore meaning. Thus, I talked to a small group of participants in depth about meaning in their lives.

On the Relationship of Meaning and Religion and Spirituality

In the blossoming field of Pastoral Counseling, religion and spirituality are integrated into the clinical lens that is used to understand the psychology of the individual and the community (Estadt, 1991). Meaning interacts with the areas of spirituality and psychology in some important ways. A person’s belief in, and relationship to, a transcendent presence or ideal seems to be part of the shaping of the way in which a person makes meaning of one’s life experiences (Jacobson, Luckhaupt, Delaney, & Tsevat, 2006). Alternatively, in many cases the pursuit of meaning is already under way and a person receives life meaning from belonging to a religious framework or through a spiritual practice (Gruner, 1984). There is a cyclical relationship between meaning and religion or spirituality. Meaning may motivate the search leading to religion or spirituality, and the latter two may reshape and inform the former (Ganzevoort, 1998a).
Silberman (2005) makes a case for approaching religion as a meaning system. Religion is based on beliefs that allow people to make sense of the world around them and their experiences. These beliefs also shape goals, expectations, and behaviors. Thus, parallel to a meaning system, it is comprised of beliefs about the self, the world and interaction between the two. Epstein (1985) wrote that meaning systems developed in order to maintain a sense of stability and coherence in a person’s conceptual framework, to balance favorably between pleasure and pain, to balance favorably the concept of self-esteem, and to ensure a perception of a favorable relationship with a significant other. These functions seem to be part of the function of religion as well.

Unique to religion, is that the focal point of the system and the significant relationship to be deemed favorable is that of a transcendent and sacred Higher Power, or God. With transpersonal sacredness at its center, religion creates unique contingencies and concepts that are foreign to more secular meaning systems which may involve spiritual transcendence. Silberman (2005), for example, used the concept that righteous people should be rewarded, and sinners should be punished.

Religion, like other meaning systems, can be learned, developed and changed. It can also be an individual and collective meaning system. Silberman concluded that approaching religion as a meaning system in the area of research would help to overcome some of the current obstacles that religion faces in empirical disciplines, such as providing a uniform language and testable hypotheses and reliable methodology.

Zika and Chamberlain (1992) posited that meaning should be treated as a separate construct from both well-being and religiosity. They have found in their research with religious groups that the relationship between religion and well-being was reduced once
meaning was entered into the equation. They argue that any association between religion and well-being is actually mediated through meaning and that religion’s association with well-being increased when the salience of religion in an individual’s life is increased. Another way that religion connects with meaning is through its relationship with spirituality. The next section will explore the similarities between the spiritual and meaningful experience.

*Common Denominators of Spirituality and Meaning*

Firestone, Firestone, and Catlett’s (2003) work drew a connection between spirituality and meaning. They stated that a healthy life is one in which meaning is crafted internally with personal beliefs, values and ethics. The authors defined the search for meaning as the development of, "our own beliefs and speculations about the vital questions in life based on our own experiences rather than on ideas and beliefs mediated through diverse or secular systems" (p.377).

They proposed common denominators between spirituality and meaning. Both spirituality and meaning are involved in transcending a limited view of one's own individual life story. Secondly, they named immersion into an experience as a connecting factor between meaning and spirituality. Yalom (1980) wrote that this is evidenced by the fact that when listening to one’s favorite song anyone would describe this as a meaningful moment.

Firestone et al. (2003) concluded that as science becomes ever more pervasive in explaining world phenomena it is becoming more difficult to justify and argue for religious explanations. Furthermore, they predicted that our spirituality – our source of connection with the sacred – will become more reliant on secular sources than older
religious mythologies. A key point is that seeking the sacred, or spiritual connection, is accessible through diverse channels, in which religion and science are two equal pathways. They suggested that, quite paradoxically, when a person delves inside themselves to find meaning they are primed for a transcendent experience beyond themselves. But, related to Maddi’s (1998) idea of “choosing the past,” or Korotkov’s (1998, p. 55) criteria for meaningfulness, when a person only looks outside of themselves for meaning they may be limited in their capacity to discover new meaning. Mascaro et al. (2004) developed the Spiritual Meaning Scale (SMS) to supplement traditional scales that measure meaning framework and meaning activity.

**Spiritual Meaning**

The SMS measures the extent to which a person believes that life or some force in life has a purpose, or will, in which individuals can participate. In a hierarchical regression analysis with an undergraduate population the authors found that the SMS along with other meaning measurements explained variance over and above the Big Five personality variables in hope, depression, anxiety, and antisocial features depression.

According to their article, Mascaro and his team created the SMS because they understood that measuring meaning strictly in terms of purpose and coherence limited our understanding of the construct. Their article stated,

A system of goals around which one maintains hope is indeed a substantial component of meaning’s link to well-being (Feldman & Snyder, 2005), but for a personal framework to be truly meaningful, it must be more significant than just a chosen system of goals. Otherwise, one need not speak of meaning, but simply of hopeful goal-pursuit. Rather, Frankl found meaning by uncovering not “. . . what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us” (Frankl, 1992, p 85). By using such language, he moved into the realm of transpersonal or what we term spiritual meaning, which is not conceptualized as a mere construct of the individual but as a capital “M” Meaning around which one can form a small “m”, personal meaning. (Mascaro et al.,2008, pp. 579-580)
In their study they used a longitudinal design and structural equation modeling with a sample of 574 undergraduate students in order to predict depression by the multidimensional existential meaning perspective, composed of personal, spiritual, and implicit aspects of meaning, over a two month period. Existential meaning was measured by the Spiritual Meaning Scale, the Life Regard Index Framework Subscale, and Personal Meaning Profile. The authors expected to find that the combined measures of meaning would predict measures of depression and that they would find a significant reciprocal effect of depression on meaning. Three measures of depression were also used.

Results showed higher levels of existential meaning were consistently associated with lower levels of depression, and there were moderate to large correlations between the three measures of meaning, adding to their convergent validity. Even more so, the authors’ model suggested that lower levels of existential meaning significantly predicted increases in depression over a two month period, and that higher meaning predicted lower levels of depression. The authors found a small longitudinal effect of meaning as a predictor of depression. They concluded that there may be other variables that are part of their prediction model and that meaning is, in part, an input and in part, an output variable. An example of a construct that pulls meaning, spirituality, and well-being into a working model is hardiness.

**Meaning in Religion and Hardiness**

Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba, & Vaitkus (2006) discussed the role of searching for meaning in the constructs of religion and hardiness, as a function of spirituality. They wrote that spirituality,
leads the person to think in terms of a higher order of functioning that emphasizes honesty, justice, courage, altruism, and other values, thus facilitating transcendence of experiential specifics through efforts to improve functioning and search for positive meaning in life. (p.148)

Like religion, hardiness seems to embody the quality of spirituality ultimately because it involves self-transcendence that is, in part, facilitated by a process of seeking meaning in one’s life (Maddi et al., 2006). Both religion and hardiness are instrumental in maintaining health and well-being, and both seem to be most protective in the face of stressful situations. Maddi (2002) drew a distinction between religion and hardiness in that in religion the source and direction of one’s spirituality is a supernatural, perhaps externally imposed order, while in hardiness spirituality is conceived of and directed toward the inherent need for an individual to ascribe order to an otherwise random universe.

In their study with a sample of 60 senior US army officials and government civilian leaders, Maddi et al., (2006) showed that hardiness is more effective in protecting against anger and depression than religiosity. Hardiness was negatively related to stress, strain, depression, and various expressions of anger, and positively related to transformational coping, and social support. Religiousness showed a less pronounced similar trend, though was related to only one anger variable, withholding expression of anger, and not related to social support. The bridge between meaning and religion, in part, seems to actually exist in the relationship between religion and spirituality. I will revisit hardiness and the connection between spirituality and meaning when I discuss the results of the narrative analysis.
The Spiritual Distinction in Meaning Theories

Spirituality appears to be a key distinction in the split between meaning theorists. Baumeister (1991) seems to be in sharp contradiction to Frankl’s (1962) conception of meaning. He seems to align himself with Yalom’s (1980) understanding of meaning that comes off as a more secular or atheistic view. I speculate that Baumeister (1991) and Yalom’s (1980) views can be traced back to Heidegger’s (1949) philosophy which left Dasein, human beings, bound to cultural norms and unable to experience true freedom. Thus, meaning occurs solely when the individual commits to the meaning framework of their society. I would further speculate that this belief was used by Heidegger to justify his involvement with the Nazi party (Lemay & Pitts, 1996). Sartre (1956), on the other hand, although an atheist, can be read as supporting Frankl’s (1962) view. In his belief the reliance on the presence of being grants access to radical liberation. Thus, the meaning in existence is always available in whatever life path is chosen.

Baumeister (1991) wrote about the myth of a higher meaning. He concluded that the idea that meaning is complete, consistent, stable, and fulfilling is false. His claim contradicts the notion that a person’s meaning in life will encompass all encounters in one’s life. In his view, not every event will be, or must be, meaningful. The nature of life, as understood today, is that it is a process of continuous change. Baumeister reasons that a concept having the same meaning over time is contradictory to the nature of life itself. While simple and discrete concepts, such as rock, most likely has had a stable meaning over time, higher level concepts, such as God, seem to be under continuous scrutiny as to what they mean. I propose that while meaning is not static, it is readily available in all moments because as meaningful beings we paint the world with meaning.
While Frankl (1962) does not explicitly talk about his theory as being spiritual, it has clear spiritual undertones and is often criticized for that purpose (Zeitchik, 2001). May (1961) and Wong (1998a; 1998b) who come from a religious life orientation do not speak fatally about meaning. They assert some concept of a transcendent quality to life that places the human being as a receiver at times, and not always the creator. “Religion,” according to Baumeister (1991, p. 184), “guarantees that whatever happens to the individual, good or bad, will make sense.” He also stated that religion appeals to most people who have no other way of understanding the world and that well educated people do not seem to need religion to help them make sense of the world.

Baumeister also stated, for research purposes it is not important if there really is a God or not, but rather, does the person believe in a God or not. I do not agree with the above assumption that religion is a safety net philosophy, or a coping mechanism for the unintelligent. The narratives that will be reviewed in the coming chapters will help to develop a sophisticated spirituality that is based on personal meaning. The stories will show the freedom that is present in making difficult life choices, to choose against culture, and also how culture can frustrate authentic living.

Cacioppo (2005) looked at meaning in light of recent theories of perception and cognition which stated that the whole visual field signifies when something is significant, more so than specific elements. This might be interpreted according to the Park & Folkman (1997) model, in that, what we perceive as significant is dictated by our global meaning system. Both spirituality and sociality contain elements of meaning-making, and they are linked as an evolved trio. According to Cacioppo (2005), spirituality, sociality, and meaning-making evolved together as an armory of survival needs. Humans cannot
exist in a state of health without them. Consequences of lacking either of the three are feelings of isolation and dysphoria, physiological problems, and motivation to reinstate connections. Related to this is the idea of meaning as perception.

Murray (1986) in his book, *Imaginative Thinking and Human Existence*, wrote about the essentiality of meaning-bestowing as a uniquely human characteristic. Murray argued that just by the fact of perceiving an object the human bestows meaning upon that object. Similarly to Baumeister (1991), Murray (1986) points out that the ability to contextualize and form connections between different objects is the root of meaning attribution. Where they diverge though, is that Murray concluded that therefore, no human action is truly meaningless. Murray seems to suggest that it is the relationship between the perceiver and perceived that creates the experience of meaning perceived by the person and meaning attributed to the object. The philosophy of French existentialist Merleau-Ponty is echoed by the aforementioned point (Lechte, 1994). Merleau-Ponty rejected the subject-object split and argued for an, “interworld,” that bound the perceiver and perceived together. An Eastern equivalent to this idea might be found in the writings of Hanh (1991), who coined the phrase, “inter-being,” to point to a reality where there is no separation between all created beings.

The above review explored the relationship between meaning and spirituality and religion. The articles presented suggested that meaning has a separate relationship with religion and with spirituality. Though results differ between articles, I can state that the process of meaning cannot be separated out from spirituality or religion. One purpose of this study is to understand the complex connection between meaning and spirituality, specifically.
In chapter 7, I will examine narratives to show how meaning unfolds through the participants’ stories in light of their personal take on religion and spirituality. A piece of that analysis will be to understand how the spiritual quality of transcendence emerges in the meaning-seeking and meaning-making processes of the narrators. I conceptualize transcendence in two different, though related ways. First is spiritual transcendence, which involved a transpersonal expansion from separate being to integrated cosmic unity. The second, personal transcendence can also be likened to spiritual, as it is an evolution of the individual past perceived boundaries (Hazelton, 1975). Personal transcendence can include spiritual transcendence. This topic will be discussed further in the fourth major theme, *Meaning through encountering and expanding the sacred.*

**Emergent Distinctions in Meaning**

*Discovering or Creating Meaning*

Frankl (1962) spoke of discovering meaning as opposed to creating meaning. For the purpose of this dissertation discovering meaning and meaning-seeking will be used interchangeably. The distinction between discovering and creating meaning was emphasized by a more contemporary theorist, Paul Wong (2008), who compared meaning-seeking to meaning-making. According to Wong, meaning-seeking is a primitive process whereby the mind transforms a tremendous amount of information and stimuli from the world into a controllable and manageable story. Meaning-seeking takes one beyond mere causal relationships between events, and aims to attribute a reason and purpose to the relationship. Meaning that is sought is based on time tested values and is held accountable by a, “Task Master, a Higher Power” (p.74). Meaning-making, in comparison, is a process of actively, “construing, constructing, and creating meaning”
Meaning-making is accomplished through acculturation and language, telling of stories, the pursuit and fulfillment of both long and short-term goals, and personal development of worldview, philosophy of life, values and belief system. Wong’s acknowledgment of meaning-seeking is unique in that meaning that is based on a Higher Power is generally criticized as failing to meet empirical rigor which cannot assert absolute truths, and contradicts the postmodern constructivist movement which asserts a continued moment-to-moment construction of meaning (Yalom, 1980; Baumeister, 1991; Zeitchik, 2001).

In Frankl’s (1962) perspective, meaning can be discovered through: (1) creating work or doing a deed, (2) experiencing a situation or encountering a person, or, (3) by one’s attitude towards unavoidable suffering. Meaning is found when engaging with the world, a catalyst for transcending the self. One gets the sense that Frankl might be speaking of meaning as if it were a primordial pool that has always existed and perhaps is unchanging, in good times or bad. Frankl writes,

> In accepting this challenge to suffer bravely, life has a meaning up to the last moment, and it retains this meaning literally to the end. In other words, life’s meaning is an unconditional one, for it even includes the potential meaning of unavoidable suffering. (p. 137)

Even in this short quote, the complexity of talking about meaning is elucidated. Frankl spoke of a meaning that is a backdrop to life and the meaning of unavoidable suffering that can be drawn from life’s meaning. This might suggest a hierarchy of meaning, similar to the global and situational meaning model of Park & Folkman (1997). Frankl (1962) equated personal meaning with ideals and values that a person would choose to die for. He suggested that each person is asked the question, “What do you uniquely have to offer to life in this moment” (p. 131)? By contemplating this question a person
can determine one’s personal meaning. This is opposite from the thinking process, what does life offer me at the moment. Related to this is the construct of search for meaning, which has been given focus in contemporary meaning literature.

Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz (2008) emphasized search for meaning as an important psychological construct separate from meaning in life. They, “define the search for meaning in life as the strength, intensity, and activity of people’s desire and efforts to establish and/or augment their understanding of the meaning, significance, and purpose of their lives” (p. 200). In the range of theories about meaning, searching for meaning is sometimes viewed as a positive or natural process, while others view searching for meaning as a sign of instability and motivated by disequilibrium. There are also opinions that see search for meaning as being potentially motivated by healthy and unhealthy circumstances (Reker, 2000).

In their study, the authors (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008) used the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) which has a presence and search subscale. Relationship between search and presence of meaning may be mirrored, opposite, independent, or insignificant depending on how the subscales each correlate with a third variable. For example, with depression, search for meaning has correlated positively with this variable, and it has correlated negatively with presence of meaning. In the current study, the authors found that people with a high presence of meaning will be more likely to express self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relationships. Alternatively, people who are searching for meaning will be low in autonomy, purpose, and personal growth.
In a second study in the same article, Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz (2008) looked at the relationships between search and presence of meaning with cognitive approaches. Results show that search related to questioning the status quo and with persistent negative thinking about the past and present. People high on searching also tend to seek out new ways to fulfill their lives, spend time ruminating on the past, and feel little control over external circumstances. In the final study of the same article, the authors looked at the relationships between search and presence of meaning with personality factors. They found that for neuroticism, search and presence mirrored each other. For extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness only presence had a significant positive relationship. For openness, only search showed a positive significant relationship.

The authors’ findings supported what they call, the Presence to Search model. This model assumes that meaning is an important psychological quality that is sought for when an individual feels a lack in meaning. It is not always the case, though that a lack for meaning becomes a search for meaning. Maintaining a sense of meaning is only one element which can restore well being. There seems to be a moderating effect of other subjective well-being factors between presence and search for meaning. The authors give the example that a highly autonomous person may not search for meaning when faced with a lack of meaning because the autonomy may buffer against any negative consequences to the loss. Their data also suggested that search and presence of meaning cannot always be conceptualized as existing on one continuum. This assertion supported the statement made by Ebersole (1998) that though people have experienced meaninglessness in their life, in the moment, many people will answer that they have
meaning. Through the narrative analysis of a diverse sample, I will look into the
dynamics of perceived presence of meaning and challenges to meaning. I will
demonstrate that personal meaning is always in a state of flux as people are discovering
what is meaningful to them and about them, and attempting to create meaningful
experiences that are informed by their discovery. As discussed earlier in this chapter,
original measures of meaning were developed from a pathogenesis and reductionist
perspective (Antonovsky, 1979). Listening to people’s own perspectives on what is
meaningful and how meaning is sought is a relatively new advancement (Wong, 1998).

*Meaning through Doing and Meaning through Being*

I have discussed above how meaning theory posits that there is more to meaning
than our sense of accomplishments in life (Frankl, 1962; Wong, 1998). In contrast to the
focus on goal setting as a facet of meaning, Ebersole & Quiring (1991) write,

> Many of people’s meaning that we have studied have either a minor goal
directed aspect or lack it entirely; for example, a majority of those who subscribe
to relationships with other people as their most central meaning are referring to
already established relationships. We suspect that such a statement could be
difficult for individuals in our goal-oriented culture to accept. They might
question whether there can be meaning divorced from a goal orientation. We side
with the alternative argument … that sometimes the meaning in life is not found
in striving but just being. (p. 115)

The authors’ idea of meaning as being is drawn from the work of Yalom (1980) who
wrote about meaning that comes from the *Hedonistic Solution*. In this view, purpose in
life is to “simply live fully, to retain one’s sense of astonishment at the miracle of life, to
plunge oneself into the natural rhythm of life, to search for pleasure in the deepest
possible sense” (p. 437). Yalom holds the view that a person must invent their own
meaning and then commit oneself to this self-created meaning. Perhaps because of this
view he reduced the sentiment of simply being to the idea that pleasure seeking is the
highest goal in life. Yalom’s leap appeared to be somewhat contradictory -- a goal of not wanting to strive for something is still a goal. Also, as will be discussed below, hedonistic pursuits may be a part of eudaimonic or meaningful pursuits (Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008), and so perhaps a more sophisticated concept than Yalom (1980) supposed is warranted.

Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master, Tich Nhat Hanh (1998), touched on a similar idea minus the reduction of meaning through being as pleasure pursuit. He wrote:

For those who have truly seen, there is no philosophy of action needed. There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment. Life is lived just as the wind blows, clouds drift, and flowers bloom. When you know how to fly you do not need a street map. Your language is the language of clouds, wind, and flowers. If asked a philosophical question, you might answer with a poem … Or point to the mountain forest. (p. 105)

Here I get a similar idea of which Yalom (1980) spoke about, the meaning of simply being, though without the association of pure pleasure seeking. In the phrase, “There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment,” Tich Nhat Hanh (1998, p. 105) appears to be speaking about the realization of unity between the perceiver and the perceived. With this mindset, one cannot want to be what they already are, and meaning is never elusive. By revisiting Frankl as cited in Yalom (1980), this Buddhist view is expressed in Western terms.

Yalom (1980) alluded to three types of meaning systems which were discussed previously: creative, experiential, and attitudinal meaning. In reference to experiential meaning, Yalom wrote:

Engagement in deep experience constitutes meaning: ‘If someone tapped your shoulder while listening to your favorite music, and asked you if life were meaningful, would you not,’ asks Frankl, ‘answer Yes? The same answer would be given by the nature lover on a mountain top, the religious person at a
memorable service, the intellectual at an inspiring lecture, the artist in front of a masterpiece.’ (p. 446)

Meaning then is also perceived when in a state of being totally immersed with your surroundings, or that which you are engaged in. The experience of expanding beyond the boundary of self is perhaps a signal of a moment of achieved or discovered meaning. In order to get a sense of the concept of being that seems to be at the root of Frankl (1984), May (1989), and Wong (2008), I will review the work of Paul Tillich (1980).

*The Courage to Be*

For Tillich, being is discovered in the construct of courage. Tillich defined his compound construct, the courage to be, as “the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation” (p.3). Tillich believed that the drive for self-affirmation is the central factor which defines the self-preserving being. The essence of the being is the striving of that being to maintain what it is in the world. This idea raised self-affirmation up beyond a reductionist view of biological survival drive to a person’s expression of one’s soul. For Tillich, “self-affirmation is participation in the divine self-affirmation (p.22).”

There seems to be a dilemma here, that in a social constructivist perspective the self is a subjective concept that might have no objective reality (Arceiero & Guidano, 2000). How then can one speak of affirming the self? This point is crucial in understanding the power of *meaning through being* and its connection with the concept of spirituality. Tillich, as taught by May (1983), wrote that when we talk about being we are speaking of a state that is prior to the subjective and objective split. Being transcends this distinction, as we saw in the philosophy of the French Existentialist, Sartre (1956). Since being is in itself a transcendent concept, it easily can be related to the concept of
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spirituality, which at its core is transcendence (Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2006).

Because of the ever-present quality of being, Tillich (1980) seemed to caution how one talks about striving for being, since it ultimately is something that one always possesses. Tillich, as he understood Nietzsche, plunged into the paradoxical nature of an individual as both possessing and striving for being. The paradox is quelled by suggesting that life is a function of self-affirming an already obtained being in order to transcend life itself to merge with a greater sense of life that is prior to the objective-subjective split.

A Narrative Exploration of Personal Meaning

McAdams has argued that individuals are engaged from adolescents onward in an effort to fashion a meaningful life narrative that will infuse their lives with a sense of unity and purpose (Singer, 2001). Wong (2008) wrote, “only the creative process of storytelling is capable of revealing the whole, full-bodied person actively engaged in the dynamics of the business of living (p. 76).” The words of these researchers and theorists bring special attention to the study of the personal narrative in order to add unique understanding to the study of the personal narrative in order to add unique understanding to construct of meaning. The shortcomings of traditional empirical measurements of meaning have already been discussed. We now turn to narrative analysis as a methodology which seems to address these weaknesses.

Use of Narratives as Data in Meaning Research

Sommer & Baumeister (1998) stated that searching for meaning in the everyday is similar to the attribution of meaning to life in general. The authors examined empirical studies that utilized narratives as data. The studies either compared different perspectives of a similar event, or similar stories that differ in some key element. For example, stories
of success or failure of a life change. Of these, the authors wrote that they reveal how people may skew the interpretation of the event to either protect or enhance their sense of meaning. By surveying several narrative studies, the authors brought to light a deeper understanding of the four meanings in life – purpose, efficacy, value, and self-worth (Baumeister, 1991).

From studies about purpose, the authors concluded that by linking negative events as a precursor to a positive outcome, victims of trauma cope with tragedy by maintaining a life direction. About efficacy, the authors concluded that people tend to place themselves in the center of the story when they are successful and tend to emphasize external elements when the result is failure (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). People also will overestimate their control over an event in the face of a challenge to efficacy, and efficacy promotes healthy emotional adaptation. From studies about value, the need for people to view their actions and right and just, people, especially those whose actions are morally questionable, will engage intensely in a process of justification. On the other hand, people in the role of victim, often seem to be granted sympathy and their narratives do not revolve around justifying their actions. For narratives about self-worth, the authors concluded that people, when self-worth is being challenged, tend to tell their stories emphasizing that the failure was in the past, or was due to external circumstances. People tend to cope with a threat to self-worth by comparing themselves to others in similar situations who may not be coping as well. Lastly, the authors speculated on the interplay between the different needs for meaning and they concluded that the need for control will at times jeopardize the need for self-worth, as in cases of rape victims holding on to self-blame to the detriment of their self-esteem. (Meyer & Taylor, 1986)
Bauer, McAdams, & Pals (2008) provided support for narrative analysis of meaning stories because meaning itself is intertwined in a person’s subjective understanding of their story. The authors wrote that the good life is not just having meaning, but expanding to more complex levels of meaning. This goes beyond well being as feeling good, but about how integrated a person feels with self and the world. One can look at if someone is simply happy, focused on pleasure or hedonic pursuits, or if one is mature, focused on meaningful eudemonic pursuits (King, 2001). The authors concluded that eudaimonic stories that related to well being are those that have a happy ending and acknowledge the growing from suffering. They expressed an integrated person, not simply a happy one (Bauer et al., 2006).

Bauer and Bonnano (2001) looked at self-evaluation statements in the narratives told by people who had experienced spousal loss. Narratives were collected after 6, 14, and 25 months after the loss. In analyzing self-evaluation statements, the authors looked at level of context. A statement can have two levels of context, either a doing-based level of context, or a being-based level of context. For example, a doing-based level of context statement is, *I went to sleep.* An example of a being-based level of context statement is, *I was tired.* In the work of Janoff-Bullman (1992) on the growth of participants through trauma, the same distinction is made using the terms behavioral and characterological. The authors also looked at the tendency for people to use integrated, doing and being-based statements. An example of an integrated statement is, *I was tired, so I went to sleep.* The authors looked to see whether one level of context used in speaking about loss would predict greater healing from the loss.
In order to analyze the narrative data, interviews were transcribed. The authors separated the stories gathered into narrative units (NU). An NU was defined as a complete thought or an idea as deemed by the intuition of those who separated the stories. The different judges’ cut-off points were compared and a ratio of agreement was calculated at .81. The authors focused specifically on complete thoughts that were narrative self-evaluations – a phrase of self-description that portrayed some aspect of the self’s life that described their actions and characteristics with a valenced adjective or adverb. For example, “whenever I helped, it turned out horrible” (p. 460). Narrative self-evaluations statements were coded for both valence (positive and negative) and level of context (being-based and doing-based).

The results of the study showed that when people used either doing-based or being-based statements, the people who used mostly doing-based statements showed a higher level of well being as time went on. Additionally, it was found that people that used integrated statements showed a higher sense of well being than people who used mostly doing-based statements. From this the authors concluded that their study supported the idea that, “[t]he integration of valued behaviors and personal characteristics fosters the construction of personal meaning … (Bauer and Bonnano, 2001, p. 456).”

While the reviewed studies above used narrative data mostly in a quantitative approach, the current study will aim to employ a more classic form of narrative analysis that is only qualitative. The reason for this is to gain unique knowledge about meaning that can only be gained by a purely qualitative narrative exploration. Bauer and Bonnano looked at level of context statements in their collected narratives, doing-based and being-based statements. This study will be looking at the same distinction, between doing and
being, though instead of segmenting them out from the total narrative, they will be evaluated within the context of the narrative episode.

The Purely Qualitative Paradigm of Narrative Analysis

In 2005 Robertson, Venter, & Botha used narrative analysis in an exploration of depression. They interviewed 10 participants who self-identified as depressed. The authors noted that in the past narratives about depression have been drawn mostly from therapy sessions and have not been adequately analyzed. Narrative analysis was employed because the methodology allows for the authentic voice of the person to be heard as truth for the one who is experiencing the phenomena.

The selection criteria for participation were very vague. Participants had to self-identify as depressed. Ages ranged from 19 to 72 years old and there were an equal number of men and women. The sample also seemed varied in terms of social economic status and race. In the write up of their study the researchers were transparent in the assumptions and models of understanding that they brought with them to the analysis of the narratives. Disclosing this was a way to lessen potential bias in listening and interpretation of the stories.

To collect the life stories participants were mainly asked to relay the story of their life. Follow up questions were used to help the participant along if they seemed stuck in their telling. In addition to the stories, non-verbal communication cues were also noted. As in the present study, the authors used the work of Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) as a guideline for data analysis. Relevant material about depression was separated out from the larger narration and explored for categorical content. Their process was described as circular, as the careful reading of the text inspired emerging themes and in
subsequent re-readings of the text, the original themes bore fruit to new themes. Throughout the reading and analysis the authors repeatedly questioned themselves if they were allowing the authentic voices of the narrators to be heard. The authors focused on themes which highlighted contradictory textual elements.

The authors’ results emphasized the negative meaning that participants attached to life experiences in general and also to their futures. The authors noticed that participants used negative and limiting language to express their life events, and their narrative approach allowed for an exploration of the socio-political contexts in which the stories took place. Another interesting finding was the emergence of ‘unique outcomes’ in the participants’ stories. These are events that occur outside of the person’s dominant life story that are contradictory to it, and thus are significant. The authors concluded that their results suggested that the use of the life narrative can be a therapeutic tool in the counseling relationship in the treatment of depression.

A similar approach has been used to study gender identity in Gay and Lesbian Orthodox Jews (Halbertal & Koren, 2006), entertainment stories as part of identity-development (McLean & Thorne, 2006), and examining the life story of a heroine addict (Singer, 2001). These studies used the narrative approach to explore their topic in a way that allows for the authentic experience of the constructs to emerge. The current study employs a similar method with the concept of meaning in life. Different from the studies where narrative data is used in quantitative analysis, this study attempts to look at meaning formation from a more pure qualitative narrative analysis.
Chapter II Conclusion

The above chapter represents a review of the roots and the breadth of contemporary meaning literature. As was discussed above researchers are continually sharpening their methods to learn more about meaning and to also specify how the presence or absence of meaning impacts the life of an individual. The connection between spirituality and meaning was emphasized for its pastoral relevance and more than that, it seems that it is ultimately hard to talk about meaning in life without the topic of spirituality emerging in some form. The relationship between spirituality and meaning was used to tap into potential areas of growth in the study of meaning. A distinction was drawn between theoretical constructs of meaning-making and meaning-seeking. Also explored was the difference between finding meaning through what one does versus through who one is.

In the chosen method inquiry, narrative analysis, I will interpret the gathered data to share their wisdom about meaning. Though I am open to learning something which was not preconceived or expected, there are several questions that are guiding this inquiry. I am interested in learning about the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists? Also, how might meaning-making and meaning-seeking play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals? Lastly, how does the spiritual or religious life impact the value placed on meaning that is harvested through action, or immersed into as part of one’s pure existence? The following chapter will lay out the chosen method exploring meaning in light of these guiding questions.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

In an article about dissertation topics in the Pastoral Counseling department of Loyola College of Maryland, Greer (1999) wrote about the progression of research output from the department. Student interests have been moving towards what Greer labels “psychotheology” (p.10). Studies of this nature have been focused on bridging the gap between psychology and religious/spiritual thought. For the purpose of pastoral identity, this dissertation continues this work in a new fashion. While Greer seemed to focus on the empirical relationship between psychology and religion, this study stems from the qualitative paradigm which does not privilege one discipline over another. I treat the wisdom of psychology and religion as equals, each with knowledge to share with the other.

The previous chapter reviewed studies in which meaning is a theme teased out from qualitative exploration. The relationship between meaning and religion/spirituality has been previously noted. They are intimately bound constructs that seem to have a reciprocal effect on one another, a complex relationship that cannot easily be captured by simple linear models. This study examined further the nature of this relationship by allowing individuals specifically to share their journey in personal meaning without constriction. By doing so, it is my intention, in part, to understand the spirituality of meaning in an individual’s life. Following is a restatement of the research questions from the conclusion of the previous chapter.
Research Questions

1. What are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists (meaning through being)?

2. How might meaning-making and meaning-seeking play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?

3. How does one’s spiritual or religious life impact the interplay of meaning-making through action or meaning-seeking encountered as part of one’s pure existence?

As I encountered the stories from the participants, I was able to sharpen and clarify the research questions. I begin the three results/discussion chapters with an explanation about how the corresponding question was modified in light of the narratives.

Theoretical Framework

The method of inquiry for this study was narrative analysis. This method seemed best suited to the above questions because it assumes that meaning may be accessed through the telling of stories. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) wrote that, “by studying and interpreting self-narratives, the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller’s culture and social world” (p.9).

There is a growing body of literature that has used narrative analysis and it is appearing in different disciplines and publications (Oliver, 1998; Josselson, 2000; McAdams et al., 2006).

Wong (2008) wrote, “… only the creative process of story telling is capable of revealing the whole, full-bodied person actively engaged in the dynamics of the business of living” (p. 76). DeVogler & Ebersole (1981) criticized the classic measurement of meaning, the PIL scale (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964), stating that there is more to
learn about meaning than to what degree it is perceived or not. Instead, they opted for narratives as their data to explore what they call “depth of meaning” (Ebersole & DeVogler, 1981). Along with these authors, this project will assume that valuable information for understanding personal meaning is accessible through story telling.

Another reason why I chose narrative analysis is because of the importance of narratives in the work of the pastoral counselor (Ganzevoort, 1998a; 1998b). As pastoral counselors we attend to the life story of a client with the same intimacy and reverence as we do to the stories of the Bible (Boisen, 1962). For a pastorally-oriented counselor a client is not simply just another person. A client is a unique expression of the divine that is journeying through life with sacred questions and sacred intentions (Estadt, 1991). The pastoral counselor is trained to attune oneself to a client’s narrative to grasp their underlying metaphor and their profound struggles. Thus I selected narrative inquiry for this study of meaning because it allowed me to fully appreciate each participant and tap into his or her unique wisdom.

Oliver (1998) reviewed two types of narrative inquiry that yield two types of results: *paradigmatic narrative analysis* and *analysis of narrative*. In the analysis of narrative method the researchers approach the collected data blindly and they construct a new narrative based on the themes that have emerged from their reading. The paradigmatic narrative analysis appears to be a better-fitting model for this study. In the paradigmatic analysis of narrative, stories are collected and then analyzed for instances that seem to fall under specific types of categories. “This process results in descriptions of themes that cut across the stories, characters, or settings, producing knowledge of abstract, general concepts” (Oliver, 1998, p.249). This form of narrative inquiry allows
the researcher to approach the narrative with theoretical intention, as long as these biases are clear from the beginning. Transparency of biases ensures that the meanings of the narratives are not being overpowered by what the researcher wants to see in the text. This will be discussed further in the ensuring quality section, and in the final discussion section, chapter 8.

Role of the researcher

During the collection of the narrative data my role was to provide a safe space for participants to explore meaning in their lives. I attempted to be a fully present witness to the experiences that the participants chose to share. As an aid, I digitally recorded each interview in order to have the interview transcribed. The recording and transcription allowed me to review the materials and to spend time with the stories to provide adequate access to interpreting the meaning of the narratives. As emphasized by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998), the narrative researcher spends time with each story, reading and rereading the text. They described an almost contemplative process, in which the researcher approaches the text as one does a lover desiring to grasp their every detail.

The divergence from quantitative methodology is very evident at this point. While quantitative analysis relies on objective truths, narrative analysis “privileges human intentionality and meaning-making, finding truth hermeneutically in experience rather than what is externally verifiable” (Josselson, 2000, p.89). The narrative analysis process is dynamic and creative. There seems to be no hard fast rules to follow, and as shall be seen, quality is judged more on authenticity and through justified interpretations than on objective correctness and replicability (Lieblich et al., 1998).
Design

Selection and Sampling

A sampling strategy, as suggested by Marshall & Rossman (2006), was considered and a mixed criterion-maximum variation sampling strategy was chosen for this study. This strategy allowed for an emphasis to be placed more on the type of stories collected, rather than the type of participants. My rationale behind this is that this is a dissertation about personal meaning in general and not about meaning for a specific group. On the cost side, I am aware that I may have missed out on some depth to the analysis that might be available with controlling for more variety in participants. On the benefit side the themes that I constructed have universal tones across the diverse sample.

The criteria for inclusion included the following: (1) Participants will be over the age of 21 and not retired from the work force. This age limit was set to limit the variation of developmental stage of the participants. (2) Participants will have been engaged at some point of their adult life in a counseling relationship. This criterion was chosen because being in therapy is relevant to the intended learning to come out of the study related to the field of counseling, and it is assumed that people who were in a therapeutic relationship might be more primed to tell stories and provide insight into the meaning of their stories.

In terms of maximum variation, it was not possible to actually have a representative of the full diversity of all people in this one study. My intention though was to not have a completely homogenous sample. As mentioned above, this is a study about meaning and not about the meaning of a specific group of people. For this reason participants were prescreened and selected based on creating a sense of diversity amongst
participants. As will be seen in the results chapter the final sample was an adequate representation of the diversity found in an urban Mid-Atlantic city. I considered the following demographic criteria when selecting participants: race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and social economic status.

**Number of Participants**

It seems that in narrative analysis studies there is quite a range for the norm of how many participants to include. Bauer & Bonanno (2001) used interviews from 69 participants, though only 6 out of the 18 minutes of each interview was actually transcribed and coded. On the other hand, Riessman (1989) collected narratives from three women to show how the meaning of a similar event, that of infidelity and divorce, can be constructed in different ways. In between these, Halbertal & Koren (2006) interviewed 18 men and women to explore the dual identities of LGBT Orthodox Israelis. De St. Aubin et al. (2006) selected eight adults, two groups of four, for his narrative study comparison of two different ideology types. As the current study used full narratives as data, keeping the number of participants to a manageable number while ensuring enough data to make the analysis meaningful was important to keeping the total project manageable. Therefore, the current study employed 12 participants.

**Access to Participant Pool**

Access was gained by word of mouth, using the various listservs that I was able to post on, such as the Loyola University of Maryland Pastoral Counseling Listserv, and email lists at my place of employment. Participants were offered a symbolic gift of a $10 coffee gift certificate or $10 donation to the charity of their choice, for participating in the study. Once a participant expressed interest in participating, a brief phone call was
scheduled to determine the fit of that individual for the study. The nature of the study was discussed and the criteria for participation were verified. If the potential participant met the criteria for inclusion, they were invited to schedule a two-hour interview session with the researcher.

Implications for Participants

Josselson & Lieblich (2003) suggested that it is important for the researcher to consider the implication for a participant to be part of one’s study. McAdams (1993) has received positive feedback from participants of his life narrative studies. He wrote that they often have thanked the researcher and refused payment, stating that they have gained insight into their life story and felt relief in their story being heard. Participants seemed to feel similarly in the current study. Though speaking about meaning in life can result in sharing about feelings of emptiness and loneliness, participants seemed to appreciate taking time out of their lives to step back and focus on their journey thus far. It also seemed that some participants, by reflecting on the theme of meaning throughout their lives, developed a sense of meaning that they perhaps had not noticed before. One participant became aware of how he perceives financial struggles as barring access to meaning, and another participants explored how his gender identity transcends the acceptable meaning framework that is accessed through being male or female.

Data Collection

Pilot study

In order to test out my questions, presented below, to see if they would illicit from individuals stories that tapped into deeper sources of meaning, I ran a pilot interview. The interview was set up in the same way that the rest of the interviews were
framed. From the experience I learned that my questions did lead to stories that were reflective of the participant’s personal meaning. I began to create my list of codes for the narratives and I began to think about initial ideas that I would look for in the following interviews. For example, I was able to see the workings of meaning through being and meaning through doing, and began initial consideration of discovery versus creation of meaning.

**Interview location**

Once recruited into the study, a two-hour interview appointment was scheduled with the participant. In actuality, the interviews lasted on average 60 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in person. Given the diversity of people in the DC Metro Area and surrounding areas this did not stifle the selection criteria. I met the each participant at a predetermined private setting that was conducive to a narrative interview. Interviews were held in the author’s office at work, at participants’ homes, at the author’s home, or at the University department office.

**Preliminary data collection**

Basic demographics were gathered including, name, age, level of education, occupation and daily activities, where raised and current place of residence, and core family description. At times this collection was done formally at the start of the interview. During other interviews the demographics might have been collected throughout the narrative as it made sense to interject questions, and demographics were also gathered at the end of the interview. The participants were told that they may return to any part of the interview that they wanted to if something new came to mind that felt relevant. They were also invited to share any pertinent demographic information that was
not asked. In light of a pilot interview executed the formal gathering of demographic information was kept to a minimal and I allowed for background information about the participant to emerge organically, as needed to share the stories.

_Narrative data collection_

I used an interview that was based on the McAdams & Bowman (2001) Life Story Interview (LSI), whereby participants segment their life story into chapters with headings and tell significant events about specific categories. The interview used here differed in that the category of focus was on stories of meaning throughout the life story. Participants were asked to relate stories about meaning in their life, stories that exemplified identity, and stories about pivotal moments. The reason why the language of _meaning, identity, and pivotal moments_ was used is because they seemed to evoke the type of meaning related stories that I was seeking to analyze. Stories from all chapters were recorded and transcribed for analysis. I used the stories from the early years, (coded _early memories_) as contextual data to understand the meaning of the stories from young adult to the current age of the participants. In terms of the research questions and the meaning distinctions being explored, the stories from adolescents and up seemed to more relevant to their personal meaning.

The following guiding questions represent the basic structure of the interview:

1. Imagine you were going to write an autobiography of your life until this point and you want to create chapters for your book. How would you divide the separate chapters and what titles or headings would you want to call each chapter? The titles should capture what the period was about.
2. Share one meaningful or pivotal story from each chapter. What meaning does that particular story hold for you?

3. Can you describe a time when you felt a lack of meaning or struggle with meaning? Was it resolved? How?

4. Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you?

5. Viktor Frankl’s (1962) question, “What do you think the world is asking of you at this moment in your life?”

I considered asking a question that would specifically focus the participant on the relationship between meaning and spirituality/religion in their life. I decided against such a question because it felt too much of a leading question given the researcher’s assumption that meaning connected with spiritual principals are generally downplayed in one’s daily life. Also, I used follow-up questions to explore the participants religious and spiritual connection if that emerged organically in the telling of their narratives.

In order for the first question to be answered the participants were given a pen and pad of paper to write down their chapter titles. The participants took between 5 and 10 minutes to complete this segment of the interview. All the participants made a list of chapters in chronological order. For the most part, chapter headings were straight forward (i.e. High School). A few participants chose creative titles for their chapters (i.e. Years of Absurdity). After the chaptering was completed the interviewer explained that the chapter list will serve as a guide for the story telling.

For the remainder of the interview the other guiding questions were asked. The actual questions asked varied by participant. If the interviewer felt that the participant touched on a particular question naturally, the question was not asked as a follow up. I
used follow-up questions in order to move the interview along through each chapter and the subsequent questions. Follow-up questions included the following:

1. Can you tell me more about that?
2. What did you make of that experience?
3. When you say you are (insert faith tradition), how do you relate to your faith?
4. In terms of meaning, how is that story staying with you today?
5. Let me just make sure I am hearing you correctly …
6. Is there a particular story that stands out for you?
7. What meaning does that story hold for you?
8. Can you go back to that moment when you …, what was going on for you?
   What do you make of what was happening?
9. What went on for you after that?
10. So from the story that you just told, why do you see it as a meaningful memory?
11. How does telling that story impact you at this moment?
12. How does your religious/spiritual beliefs impact the meaning of the story you shared?

Josselson & Lieblich (2003) stressed that for narrative inquiry, preselected methods and questions must be kept flexible to ensure authenticity. After the interview, I reviewed the process with the participants. The participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study and also to give any feedback about my interview style and the process in general. The participants were reminded that I would follow up with them in order to complete participant checks of my interpretations.
Data Analysis

Defining a Narrative for the Current Study

The narrative technique used collected narratives as data for analysis. A narrative can mean many different things and it is up to each researcher to define what a narrative is for their study (Riessman, 1993). Labov (1997) and Labov & Waletzky (1997) wrote at length on what defines a narrative. They studied narratives that were told by participants who were mostly not high school educated. The authors found that a narrative is comprised of narrative constructs that are linked together chronologically in a way that represents an event that actually took place. They defined a narrative quite specifically of having a an introductory orientation section, a complicating action sequence, an evaluative clause of the conflict which might include the significance of the narrative, a resolution of the complicating action, and a final coda clause which brings the narration back to the present.

Riessman (1993), adopting a more simplified stance, stated that a narrative has elements of a chronological structure and a thematic sequence. A narrative will also very often have a consequential sequence. McAdams (1993) identified a story as having a setting, human-like characters, some kind of initiating event which motivates an attempt or a reaction by a character, a recognizable sequence, and solution of the plot. For this dissertation the term narrative was defined as any piece of the collected interview that tells a story. The other information that was shared was used as contextual support to interpret the meaning of the episode. Thus simply put, a narrative was a telling of a story that had the classic elements of a beginning, middle, and some sort of ending.
Such a definition was used by Wa Mungai & Samper (2006) as they collected stories from people of Nairobi that related to the particular experience of riding on public transportation. At first, the authors informally heard these stories and realized how essential they were to the culture of Nairobi. Later, the researchers conducted more formal interviews, recording the stories and systematically interviewing people based on the snowball effect method of sample. The snowball method involves meeting new participants from participants that have been interviewed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In the Nairobi study (Wa Mungai & Samper, 2006) the authors seemed to be less concerned about evening out the demographics of their participants and more concerned with the content of narrative that was being told. Similarly, in the present study though there were limitations set on participation criteria, the main focus of the interviews was to gather stories that revolved around the specific theme of meaning.

What Counts as a Meaningful Story?

Since the participants were asked to share stories that were specifically seen as meaningful or significant, I counted all of the stories told as meaningful narrations. For this reason the content of a meaningful story in this study can quite diverse, such as an experience of being validated or an experience of spending time with a good friend. As will be explored further, a meaningful story is made meaningful because it affirms an individual’s being as meaningful. In somewhat cyclical logic, the narrative is meaningful because, in a way, it is already meaningful as the being of the person speaking is meaningful. The narratives that I will review will be interpreted in light demonstrating the narrator’s encounter with their raw meaning through simply being. Given that there
are infinite possibilities for how meaning can be expressed, in the end it all ties back to one’s experience of being.

Encountering the Narratives

The recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional individual who has experience in transcribing interviews for analysis. Once transcribed, I read the transcription while playing back the interview in order to reconnect with the text. In accordance with Lieblich et al. (1998) the transcriptions were read carefully with a focus on holistic-content. The authors wrote that holistic-content reading “takes into consideration the entire story and focuses on its content” (p.15). Leiblich et al. provided several examples of holistic-content reading (See Bateson, 1989; Lieblich, 1993; Josselson, 1996) and presented a narrative case study conducted by Lieblich which demonstrated the process of moving from text to themes. In addition, some of narratives were reviewed by members of the author’s dissertation committee and a fellow doctoral student. Having multiple readers of the texts allowed for various interpretations and different perspectives about the texts.

Engaging the Narratives

Lieblich et al. (1998) laid out five steps for reading a text with a holistic-content perspective. For step one, the authors wrote, “Read or listen carefully, empathically, and with an open mind. Believe in your ability to detect the meaning of the text, and it will ‘speak’ to you” (p.62). It is through the repetitive reading of the narrative that significant pieces within the context of the whole story might be constructed. For the second step, the authors suggested recording initial and global impressions about the text. In this step the reader will also pay attention to pieces of the text that seem disharmonious to the
whole. In the third step the reader decides on which themes to focus on and follow throughout the text. The forth step is accomplished by coding the different themes. The authors suggested coding the themes using different colored markers. The final step, step five, involves keeping track of results by following each theme and noting conclusions. The authors also suggested paying attention to the starting and ending point of a theme, to transitions between different themes, to the context of each theme, and to their relative prominence in the text.

For the current study the coding was accomplished using the qualitative methodology software, NVivo 8. NVivo 8 allowed me to store the recordings and the transcriptions in an accessible organized file. I utilized the annotations function to record initial impressions about the narratives. I used the memo function to save each narrative in its own file with my notes and impressions. The following of themes within and across the interviews was facilitated by the coding function of the NVivo8 software.

*Translation of Texts to Themes*

My process for coding the narratives was as follows:

1. I highlighted the actual stories that were told and coded them as “narratives” in order to separate the stories from tangential conversations that may have occurred, or the participant speaking in general about the chapter they were going to tell a story about.

2. Within the narratives I coded for actual story details versus context to the story. Context might have been family background or about the relationship between people in the stories. Context might also have been general details about location or the time period. I coded the context and the story details for following structural categories:
Contextualizing the Narrative, Early Memories, Emotional Tone of Narrative, Narratives, Second Telling, Story Detail, Summary of Story, and Story in a Story.

3. Separately, I coded the answer to the follow-up question about the meaning of the story for the participant.

4. As I read the story details, context, and meaning of the story, I was mindful to take note of how meaning was spoken about as connected to action, or connected to one’s character. I interpreted meaning connected to action as *meaning through doing* and meaning connected to one’s character as an access point to *meaning through being*. Examples of different doing-based and character-based statements and how I coded them will be further explained in chapter 5. I also coded sources of meaning that were spoken about in the narratives. For example, I coded statements as *friendship, illness and death,* and *other’s impact on present meaning*. Another aspect of the stories that I tracked were elements that I felt were spiritual constructs, such as *sacrifice, hope,* and *forgiveness*. I decided to follow the spiritual elements because of the third research question which centers on the religious/spiritual framework of the participants. Some of the codes I used came about from summarizing statements in the story and how they related to the meaning that was being expressed through the story. For example, I coded statements as *mystery or starting over* because they seemed central to the meaning framework of the individual. This last type of coding also helped me to identify what pieces of the narrative should be part of the participant summaries that are presented in chapter 4.

5. Lastly, I coded narrative segments for demographic and contextual purposes, such as *family history* and *faith traditions*.
In total, 82 nodes were developed across all the transcriptions. Appendix 1 lists all of the free nodes that were used to code the texts. As new nodes were created previously viewed narratives were reread in light of the new nodes. I used the nodes to keep track of patterns that I saw throughout the texts. If a pattern seemed interesting in light of the theories reviewed in chapter 2, or the patterns seemed consistent over several texts I added the trend to a Theme memo. I refer to the compilation of these nodes and ideas across the narratives as emerging trends.

The Theme memo helped to keep track of all the emerging themes. When a transcription analysis was complete the narratives were reviewed in light of all the emergent trends. Notes were kept in the memo in order to keep track of which stories complimented or contradicted a trend. As more transcriptions were reviewed, more potential trends were noted and then older narratives would be reread to see how they related to these new trends. In chapter 4, I will present the full list of emerging trends. Of the full 24 trends that are recorded, only 5 of them are categorized and presented in full detail as major themes.

Additionally, upon completing the analysis of all the texts, the stories were categorized into story types (i.e. Stories about a Hero). I analyzed the narratives for types because it answered the most basic question of, from what kinds of stories do people draw meaning? The story types will serve as the stage with which the exploration of the research questions (Chapters 5 – 7) stand upon. The story types were scrutinized by committee and peer review. As a reference comparison I used the categories of the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) (Wong, 1998), discussed in chapter 2, to compare with the story types that I came up with. The PMP identifies the sources from which
individuals draw meaning from. It is an empirical test that was based on qualitative exploration. The comparison is presented in Figure 3.

Procedures for Attaining and Assessing Excellence

Quality in this study was achieved by maintaining complete transparency about the unfolding of the analysis of the narratives to the members of the dissertation committee and in peer review. The NVivo 8 software helped to facilitate transparency by allowing me to map out my thoughts in the analysis from text to trend to theme. I teamed up with a colleague who read a selection of the narratives, acting as another set of interpretive eyes for the data. I also kept a journal on NVivo 8 in order to stay aware of biases that might have influenced interpretation of the text. All coding, memos, and annotations were open for the committee methodologist to review. Each participant was given a participant summary that contained an abstract of the narrative content that I thought was significant to understand the meaning framework of the participant. The summaries also included an interpretation of the way meaning was spoken about by the participants. Participants offered feedback to the author to ensure that they were authentically heard and captured in the analytic process. In doing so, the study held up to the highest standards of trustworthiness, taking into account quality criterion that are specific to a study that is in the constructivist camp of qualitative research.

Guba & Lincoln (1994) referred to authenticity criteria, which included fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity, and tactical authenticity. Fairness is maintained as long as alternative constructions of reality are not ignored, but honored. This was ensured by having outside readers of the narratives and welcoming their interpretations. Ontological authenticity is a personal criterion whereby
a participant’s world view is expanded and matured. As participants shared their experience of meaning they had the opportunity to think more globally about this construct and its importance for other people as well. Ontological authenticity was also seen as the participant summaries sparked several ongoing conversations about personal meaning between the participants and me. With educational authenticity a participant learns about the constructions of the other and learns to welcome and value them.

*Catalytic authenticity* ensures that the study has motivated some kind of action. I assume that providing a forum for reflecting on meaning is an action in itself that will benefit the study’s participants. Furthermore, there are quality guidelines put out by the NIH (2001) and the National Centre for Social Research in the UK (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003) that helped me to maintain quality at each step of the project.

**Implications of the Findings**

Personal meaning is a cornerstone of humanistic philosophy and of psychological well-being. Currently, the empirical research about the value of meaning in one’s life seems to paint an incomplete picture. Clinicians are aware that setting and working towards goals creates the experience of meaning in their clients’ lives. What seems lacking is an understanding of meaning in the stories of individuals and the more subtle points of meaning philosophy. Referring back to chapter 2, theorists write about meaning that is uncovered and always present in a person’s life. Meaning might be seen as a state of being to be tapped into in trying times. It is an approach to meaning that promotes human dignity and affirms the innate human drive towards self-improvement. This perspective can inform clinicians’ work when their client is stripped of the usual sources
Another area of potential growth in the meaning literature is the relationship between spirituality and personal meaning. Both have been described as relating to the experience of immersion and transcendence. Immersion is feeling a sense of unity with one’s environment or the present moment. Transcendence is growing beyond the boundaries that were once seen as impenetrable (Firestone, Firestone, and Catlett, 2003). It seems as if there is more to learn from personal narratives about this topic which might help to understand a classic distinction between meaning-making and meaning-seeking. What is the role of spirituality in these two processes? As will be seen, the term sacred is expanded when people talk about meaning and there is an experiential difference between meaning-making, or creation, and meaning-seeking, or discovering. Also, spirituality seems fundamental in the experience of meaning through being.

This study focused on the personal narratives of its participants. The knowledge from this study may pave the way for future studies looking at specific populations that struggle with issues of personal meaning. Examples of these types of populations include people who are in drug/alcohol recovery programs and people who are unemployed. The study also may lend itself to the development of therapeutic tools and techniques to help a client tap into a raw state of meaning that exists outside of pursuit and achievement. It is my hope that this study will directly impact the philosophy of meaning and clinical practice.
Reflexive Statement of Research and Personal Stance

I am a 30-year-old Jewish Caucasian male. I grew up in a predominantly Jewish and Italian neighborhood in Brooklyn. I am educated at a master’s level in Counseling and Guidance and am currently in a PhD program in Pastoral Counseling. In addition to school, I work as a part-time therapist for a D.C. based homeless-services agency. I work specifically in the day care program, serving people with chronic mental illness, and providing therapy to outpatient clients. I am licensed as a Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Maryland and in Washington, D.C. In the arena of mental health, my interests include the connection between psychological well-being and spirituality, and the experience of meaning in one’s life. I use the humanistic-existential lens to primarily understand his clients.

In terms of religion, I have a strong Jewish identity. I have struggled to find my place in the Jewish faith. I currently do not identify with any one specific denomination and am open to egalitarianism in Jewish leadership. I identify as orthopractic in regards to the laws of Sabbath and the kosher dietary laws. Being part of community is very important to me. I often engage in community building activities and try to stay active in my local community, that being mostly Jewish community. I take a deeply spiritual stance towards my faith and currently I am content with God being a mystery and humans having to act with uncertainty about if there truly is a right path to live.

My interest in meaning through narratives is very much tied up with my story. I have struggled with meaning on numerous occasions and view these struggles as part of my own growth. An excerpt from my journal will exemplify how my own struggle with meaning sparked the motivation to pursue this current course of study.
I felt that the world was telling me that I had to do something in order to be something. I was not able to settle on something to do and for a time I took comfort in the meaning that is provided by religion. There is meaning, I learned, because God brought me into existence. After a while I began to change and grow in my spirituality, where the simple answers that were provided by religion no longer satisfied me. I was thrust into darkness and was resolved to do nothing and therefore, be nothing. At the bottom of this black hole I felt my belly rise and fall with breath. I watched my breath and found in it a metaphor. The breath just is, moving in and out without effort. It is constant and always present, and its greatest attribute is that it simply does what it is. It breathes. I began to stir with new resolve and a thought arose into my mind, *I breathe, therefore I am. This is meaning enough.*

The above excerpt relates to a main question of the current study, *what are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that can be tapped into, before the process of goal-direction?* This question also reveals my expectation to discover through narrative that individuals are telling stories about a meaning that is not connected with action, but they are unaware of this, or do not put as much value on this type of meaning. The author believes that most people today are lead to think about their meaning and self-worth in terms of their accomplishment and to ignore the innate value of simply being alive. This idea is a major theme of the literature review above, where I have gathered published perspectives on this being-action duality in meaning. While I hoped to interpret the narratives based on the above question, I have received feedback from other readers in order to be free to see other wisdom that is transmitted through the collected stories.

**Chapter III Conclusion**

The above chapter on methodology described the mode of inquiry for the current study – narrative analysis. This method was selected because it is intimately connected with meaning and so it will allow me access to new wisdom about personal meaning. I have begun to explain how I read the narratives for what the participants were saying about personal meaning. Ultimately, the method explained above was used to expand
upon the theories about meaning that were presented above in chapter 2. The main thread that I would like to weave through is that meaning through one’s sense of being is alive and well in the human experience and should not then be excluded from meaning theory.
CHAPTER IV

Contextualizing Results and Discussion

In this chapter I will provide an overview of major results that will be explored in more detail throughout the remainder of this dissertation. First, I will present a summary of participant demographics, followed by a sketch of each participant in order to give the reader points of reference for the stories that I will analyze and quote as I explore answers to the research questions. Then I will provide an analysis of the types of meaning stories that were told and a list of trends and themes that arose from a content analysis of the narratives. (For the more detailed procedure of how I came up with the story themes and emerging trends one can refer back the previous chapter.) These macro level results will provide transparency regarding how I interpreted the narratives. In the conclusion of this chapter I will explain how the remainder of the dissertation will expound more deeply about the themes of the narrative analysis and tie into the larger concepts of meaning, being, and spirituality.

Demographic Summary

Table 1 below presents the demographic breakdown of the 12 participants interviewed for this study on those dimensions pertinent to understanding their stories and evaluating the transferability of my analysis: age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious/spiritual identity, and occupation or calling. Table 2 summarizes the demographic information for easy reference.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fictional Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Religious/Spiritual Identity</th>
<th>Occupation or Calling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Jewish – Spiritual not traditionally observant</td>
<td>Ecology and Jewish Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Just Christian</td>
<td>Addictions Counselor Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarran</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Active in Non-denominational church</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Catholic Non-practicing</td>
<td>School Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Attends Quaker Meetings</td>
<td>Educator/Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Catholic/Buddhist</td>
<td>Educator/Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louis</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Jewish – Spiritual not traditionally observant</td>
<td>Educator/Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Jewish Renewal</td>
<td>School Worker/Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thina</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Catholic - mild participation</td>
<td>Green Architecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Woman of Color</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Unitarian</td>
<td>Non-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Universalist/Buddhist</td>
<td>Work/Writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daryl</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Spiritual – Jewish interested/Universal</td>
<td>Director/Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal God</td>
<td>Volunteer Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Summary of Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgender</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European American</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American (includes Woman of Color)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen in the Tables 1 and 2, there was an appropriate diversity of participants in this study, representing a sample from a metro urban area in the United States Mid-Atlantic region. As explained in Chapter 3, I wanted to investigate meaning in general and not for a specific group, thus the above group of people was purposefully selected to ensure such diversity. What I did not foresee at the onset of this study was that participants experientially did not fit neatly into a religious/spirituality paradigm of religious, spiritual, or neither. As the participants told their stories it became clear that their religious and spiritual identities were as unique as their narratives. One participant
also specifically requested his or her religion be changed in order to conceal his or her identity. While participants are grouped into tables, it is worth noting that participants’ religious and spiritual beliefs did not fit neatly into distinct categories. An example can be seen by comparing the identities of Louis and Evan. While they both considered their relationship to Judaism as spiritual and they may not observe many of the laws of Jewish practice, their stories about religion are completely different. They have different religious struggles and their practice and profession of their faith is different. Therefore, I do not draw any conclusions about the participants’ stories based on a distinction of religious categorization.

Another unforeseen trend that is beyond the scope of this study was the occupational breakdown of the participants. Half of the participants have training in mental health or addictions counseling or social work. This factor might play into how they think about meaning through stories, as they may potentially facilitate this process for others on a regular basis. The criterion for previous experience in therapy was chosen to balance the comfort level of people talking about themselves and sharing personal details with the interviewer. The effect of being in practice to listening to stories regularly was not factored into the choice of participants.

Meet the Participants

In this section I present the summaries of each of the 12 participant interviews. The summaries are intended to capture the significant background information about each participant. As I explained in chapter 3, I used the coding for demographics and family to identify some of the information that went into the summaries. Significant events were also included in the summaries. I mostly identified an occurrence as a significant event if
it acted as precursor for change in the participant’s life path or world view. For example, a divorce or witnessing of trauma was seen as a significant event. Significant events were also interpreted as emotionally charged as I attended to the nonverbal cues of participants while they were speaking. Additionally, the summaries contain a brief look at how meaning emerged in each participant’s stories. I tried to highlight the sources from where the participant was drawing meaning from, as well as meaningful values that seemed to shape the overall life narrative of the participant.

Before they were included in the results section, the participant summaries were sent to participants for revision. Mostly, the participants agreed with the author’s summary. On a few occasions the participants offered minor corrections (for example the number of siblings they had) and on one occasion there was a request for greater concealment of the participant’s identity by altering a few descriptive facts. These requests were honored in the descriptions below.

Evan

Evan is a 24-year-old Jewish male. He was born in California, though he grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. Evan holds a B.A. degree and plans to return to school to ultimately become a professor of Ecology. Evan’s parents are still married and he has a close relationship with his sibling. At the time of the interview Evan had decided to move to a small private cottage in upstate New York. He hoped that this move would give him a balance of solitude and community. Evan described himself as spiritually Jewish and observant of many Jewish practices, but not necessarily religious.

As sources for meaning, Evan draws on nature and his faith tradition. In his interview I asked Evan about his religion he answered,
Evan: I’m Jewish

Interviewer: Is that something you identify....?

Evan: Very strongly and also I mentioned earlier, ecology, I find it personally very meaningful

Evan also tagged himself as having a “contrarian nature.” This term suggests that he finds meaning in walking his own path directly separate from societal norm. He shared

…if there was a [party] and everybody’s dancing the same dance I couldn’t do it. It was impossible for me, it would drive me up the wall that everyone was dancing the same dance, conformity was evil in my estimation like there is nothing worse than being normal and normal is like everyone else, and what good is that …

Evan seemed to deal with challenges to meaning by taking some alone time. He likened himself to Thoreau, separating himself from the rest of society to keep in touch with nature and to keep an open mind. Evan found great significance in the meaning of his first, middle, and last name. For him they seem to point towards his vocation and to one of his hobbies. Interestingly, Evan shared that he does not separate himself from the world to go inside himself, rather he seemed to find meaning through connections that are external to him. This insight to Evan came about when he shared his opposite nature to his brother’s:

I have put myself in opposition or contrast to my oldest brother most, who I always saw as looking internally and I would always look out whether that be to nature, or other outward expressions

This above excerpt allows for a clearer understanding of what Evan gains from nature. When Evan in nature he feels connected and pulled outside of himself. As explained about his connection with Thoreau,

I am going to embody myself and building this and living a little bit of that Thoreau isolation. To me Thoreau’s isolation was enough to distance himself to quiet himself, he didn’t go to the wilderness by any means, he was a mile way
from other people, but it was enough to call his own, to be on his own schedule to not hear the other stimuli that he did need to, didn’t want to either.

According to Evan, he finds inner peace in nature, so he can connect better with the people in his life. He finds meaning by connecting to people that he is close with, and connecting with plants and animals. Evan spoke about a dichotomy between being internally focused and externally focused. In response to his older brother's extreme introversion, Evan seemed to develop an external focus.

Evan showed the capacity to identify and engage in what he finds meaningful as evidenced by his choice to teach what he loves – Judaism and ecology. While he expressed a desire to connect more deeply with his Jewish heritage, he found that the traditional Jewish paths of study and community were closed to him and meaningless. Evan was unsure of how to engage authentically in the traditional Jewish world.

**Annie**

Annie is a 44-year-old African American female living in Washington, DC. She is single mother of three children. Annie works as Certified Addiction Counselor (CAC) and has an Associates Degree in Business management. She plans on continuing with her education to become a social worker. Annie considers herself to be "just Christian." She believes strongly in Jesus and his teachings, though she is not tied to any particular denomination. Annie attends church regularly. She is in recovery from substance abuse. She owns two homes and hopes to convert one home into a substance abuse treatment program facility.

Annie drew her personal meaning from bettering herself and proving to herself that she is not just a homeless addict. This assumption is evidenced by the stories that Annie told which mostly focused on her accomplishments that she and her deceased
mother would be proud of. Annie deals with the guilt of not being there for her mother when her mother became terminally ill. Though knowing that her mother sees that she is a different person today provides Annie with a little relief.

… but today I know that I wasn't in my right state of mind and she sees me now. And that's what makes me, that's what makes the hurt a little better to deal with now and I know that she sees me but I just …[broken off, pause]

Annie words show that she is still struggling to find meaning around her mother’s death. It is evident that her spiritual-based beliefs that there is a connection with loved ones who have died are part of her healing formula.

Annie found meaning when she became an inspiration to her community with her surprising success story as she eventually received help to own her own home. There is something groundbreaking to her sense of being that she can call herself a “homeowner,” rather than homeless. Though her language seemed to focus on her accomplishments, she first went through a transformation to see herself as worthy of planning and goal setting, but more powerfully as someone who can help others.

That [Her success story] has meaning for me that even though I was at a place where I felt like I wasn't being a help or of service I actually was. You know I was being used in another way other than being the assistant records manager I was also being used to help people go through doors that they were trying to get through.

Yarran

Yarran is a 29-year-old African American male. He grew up in the Washington DC Metro area and in North Carolina. He was raised mostly by his mother and step-father as his parents divorced when he was younger. Yarran is the second oldest of four siblings. He is a college graduate and has worked as an electrical engineer for the same company for the past several years. Yarran is an active member in a non-denominational
Christian Church. He is involved in their youth ministry program and volunteers on their church farm.

Yarran expressed that he always has some kind of pursuit, whether it be a woman, or money, or anything else. He seemed to really enjoy telling the stories and it was noticeable that his actual narratives were very short in comparison to the amount of context that he gave for each story. Yarran mostly viewed meaning as a message that has stayed with him, or a significant aspect of a time period -- for example a story about studying with a good friend. I am including most of the Yarran’s narrative about studying in college because it gives a clear sense of how Yarran approached the interview and thought about meaning.

The calculus story is a, is simple, is-- short and it-- captures that time period very well, you know. Um, captures that time period very well. I was very focused and determined and hungry, I think that’s the best word I know to describe it off the top of my head, there’s a better, there’s better words. But, I had a very strong desire to finish school and do well. Um, I’ve wanted that more than, OK well, I’d say, you know, next to pursuit of certain women--I’m leaving something out, but I don’t remember. Next to pursuit of certain women, I’ve wanted to do well in school more than I think, anything else, you know? Like, out of all the things I wanted in life, like I– You know, you-- the things that are important to you in life are the things that you, you spend your time on, right? So I spent my time on a lot of women, and I spent my time studying so much in college. And one, one of my friends has this picture, and I need to find it. That friend may be me, in some box somewhere, but I have this picture permanently ingrained in my mind, and it goes with the story.

Thus far, Yarran has shared that a meaningful story is one that, “captures that time period very well. He stated that women and excelling in school were meaning pursuits for him. All of this information, which is important in my understanding of Yarran, is only context to his story which begins with,

This one day, freshman year, which is much like any other day, I’m studying with my good friend X. Um, X. and I weren’t great friends in high school, but I knew X. and hung out, but in college we just ended up in the same
dorm and, and we had the same calculus class, so, I would see, I see him all the time. We started studying together. He’s also roomed with another guy from high school who I didn’t know very well but I knew, um, and the three of us are still really great friends … So they had this dorm room together and X. and I would just always be studying calculus, or if not, I’d be studying physics or, for one of my engineering classes and he’d be doing something else but we’re always in one of the lounges, in one of our rooms, in the library doing homework. Um, goofing off a lot, you know—my attention span isn’t all that amazing or great, but at the same time, you know, getting work done. Um, and even on Friday or Saturday night we would study, depending on like, if we had a exam on Monday, like we’d start studying Friday. We just wouldn’t go out. We didn’t go out very often. Nah, we did. Like half of the Friday nights we’d go out and play pool or watch a movie, that’s generally what we did. Me, X., and a couple other guys.

Yarran gave only a short lead-in to the story (“This one day, freshman year, which is much like any other day, I’m studying with my good friend X.”) and then he returned to the contextualization of the story. I had the sense that Yarran wanted me to be able to understand his story’s meaningfulness by explaining in detail how essential the story was to his life at the time of its occurrence. He did quickly tell the actual narrative,

But on that particular Friday night, maybe Saturday night, we were … Doing homework. We’re on the floor, just doing problems, it’s late, it’s, you know, 1, 2 o’clock in the morning. And both of us fall asleep. And we fall asleep with the calculus book right between both of our heads. Like, separated, our heads are separated by three feet, four feet, and the calculus book’s right in between both of us

I still think that when J. [another roommate] came home and took a picture of us, that the calculus book was probably open. But I mean, who knows, I was passed out. In any case he’s got this perfect, idyllic picture of, you know, that moment, of just me and X., like, studying until we fell asleep, like, in this great pose, so. I’ve always thought that was a great shot, and captured a lot of college. Not all of it, but a bunch, so. Yeah, I spent a lot of time with X. in college. That’s one reason we’re such good friends now.

With the extreme attention to context, Yarran’s story felt anti-climactic. He used many words to express a very simple story. I decided to probe deeper for the meaning behind the story and asked,

Interviewer: Anything to say about the meaning for you that, meaning of that story for you now?
Yarran: Yeah. [Pause] Just a couple interesting points in that. Like one of it was, you know, one meaningful thing about it is, I think just my friendship with X., um, and how that picture captures that, how that picture captured the fact that, you know, captured the fact that we’re, we’ve been friends for a while and that we worked hard at something together, um, and I guess after the fact, that our friendship was important to us then. Um, and then on the studying side, [Pause]. I guess it’s also meaningful for me to remember that, I think it’s also meaningful for me to remember that sometimes things are easier with friends. And I know a lot of what made college easy … easier and enjoyable for me was the friends I collected along the way. Like, we really leaned on each other during college, we helped each other a lot. It was never easy for me to study alone, so, uh, it was definitely really good that I had somebody to study with.

In Yarran’s answer he reflected on the value of friendship in his meaning schema. He also restated how he organizes his meaning stories based on which narratives will best sum up his life experience at the time. Another concept that he touches on is seeing an experience as meaningful if it has a lasting moral. For the story about the moral was, “sometimes things are easier with friends.”

Yarran stressed that he does not think about meaning that much and in his stories he seemed to just relate experiences without reflecting about what that says about him as a person. For example, he told a story that shows how he is different from his siblings, but he did not go further on to reflect what that says about him other than that he might be different. Yarran also appeared not to acknowledge the things about himself that make him unique and gifted, such as being put into an advanced class when he was younger and being adept at keeping an optimistic life focus.

Edward

Edward is a 30-year-old Puerto Rican American male living in Baltimore County, Maryland. He was born in the USA, though was raised mostly in Puerto Rico. Edward grew up speaking English in his home. He works as a High School teacher for a special needs private school. Edward lives with his girlfriend and her two sons. Edward was
raised by his mother while he lived in the USA, and by his grandmother and extended family when he lived in Puerto Rico. I noticed that abandonment was a theme throughout his narrative. His father left him and his mother when Edward was an infant and his mother’s response to his father’s action greatly affected his perception of his early years. Edward stated,

Yeah, my dad wasn’t gonna get custody. He was a big pot head. My mom didn’t smoke pot. Yeah I don’t think he wanted custody anyway. He wanted to go and have sex with this woman all the time, and do drugs with her, and not care about the world. So you know, she was a little bit bitter, and she didn’t stop that from transferring to me or the rest of the family for numerous years.

The belief that Edward’s father did not want to be involved in his life was reinforced by his mother bitterness. The meaning for Edward’s world was perceived through the lens of abandonment and this continued on throughout his early adolescence. As a young teen Edward’s family sent him to a school in West Virginia. Edward really enjoyed the experience and had a genuine taste of family feeling. Unfortunately for Edward, his family in Puerto Rico was not pleased with the school’s relaxed environment and had him brought home. When Edward returns home he met with joy by his extended family, but he shared the following about his mother’s reaction.

But as soon as I got to the airport my family was very happy to see me, I’m like, “Mom, mom,” I noticed that my mom wasn’t happy to see me at all, which for a kid is really damaging, I was like, why, what did I do wrong, why is she being so nasty to me?

The above excerpt demonstrates the continued theme of abandonment in Edward’s life and it also gives evidence to Edward having many times of starting over. As a result he struggled greatly to secure some measure of personal agency. He was moved between Puerto Rico and the USA several times. In Edward’s family college was not seen as an
expectation. He did enroll in a local college by his grandmother’s house in Puerto Rico only because he was not sure what else to do.

When he began his college career, Edward was diagnosed with depression. He stated,

And that first year, from the time I turned 18 until the time I turned 19, I went through a really bad depression because of all the crap that I had to take again. I mean, it’s not like I have a persecution complex, but I was not happy where I was. So I was taking Zoloft for a while, and even though it was a pretty good year, I was still going through this whole funk. Even though I was trying to make the best of it and my grandmother’s house was fun and everything, I was being really lazy and my family was starting to resent me a lot.

Edward’s relationship with his family is very unique among the participants in this study. He is estranged from his father, and his relationship with his mother might be characterized as codependent, or more casually as a “love-hate” relationship. His mother lives in the USA. Edward’s main support comes from his grandmother and a large extended family that live in Puerto Rico. Though Edward respects their caring attitude toward him, he seems to fall into a complacent boredom when he is around them. And eventually he suffers from depression.

He shared about an intervention that was executed by his extended family in Puerto Rico to confront him about his lethargy. The family’s tactic appeared was worthwhile as Edward became motivated to excel in school and get a job.

Yeah, it was kind of like an intervention, but for my behavior, not my—any habits, at all. So it was really impacting me, so I really need to do something with my life, I hadn’t had a job since high school, it had only been a year, right, but. So I decided to look for a job and I worked for the town for the summer and I made some money, and I was getting on my family’s good side again. Even though my grades were crappy, but that year -- when I started my 19th year, when I started that second year of college, I made it to the honor roll. I made it to the honors club and I was invited to the banquet and everything. All my grades were either A’s or B’s, even in things like chemistry and pre-calculus. I was really proud of myself …
He had a successful college career and moved to New England to work in wildlife education. Edward seemed to draw meaning from family and friendships. He expressed frustration when things did not seem just to him and he was very aware of his lack of privilege in American society due to his modest income.

It feels like, you know, just let us be, so we can save enough to be, like one of these days the kids are gonna wanna go to college, we need enough money to not be debt free, so we can afford the basic things. So I don’t know if it’s the world, but it just feels like, you know like, some rich dude wins $270 million already in the lottery, even though he was already rich, but these poor people-- and I try to do as much as I can, I try to save as much money, but it just—it feels like money is like, they say money doesn’t buy anybody happiness, but I’m saying that whoever has it at least has more of an ease of not having to struggle to be able to afford his medication, or to get better health insurance, to send their kids to better schools, to not have a car that breaks down every two seconds.

Many of Edward’s meaning stories were about struggle, challenge, and what he had to overcome. He identified as a Catholic, though he shared fundamental disagreements with the Church's policies on certain issues, for example, rejecting homosexuality. Currently, Edward does not actively engage in a relationship with God.

Edward told multiple stories in quick succession. He seemed to enjoy talking about his past and had a lot to share that perhaps he does not always get to talk about, for example, being a teacher and caretaker for a partner and her two children. He is mostly separated from his root family, but has created a new family where he is utilizing his childhood lessons of what a child and family needs. Edward did not actively reflect on who he is, but he reflected on how things should be. His main source of personal meaning appears to be tied up with justice.

*Thomas*

Thomas is a 29-year-old Caucasian male from the DC Metro area. He is the
youngest of three children, one of which is his twin sister. Thomas is the only son in the
family. Thomas comes from an upper-middle class family. He stated that his father is an
alcoholic, and as a result Thomas suffered early emotional abuse, and hinted as
witnessing abuse to other family members. He went to a wealthy high school and a public
college institution. Thomas was at first on a path to become clergy in the Catholic
tradition, but then, 3 years ago fell in love with a woman and decided that he would not
continue his training. While religion and spirituality are stated as being important to
Thomas, he did not clearly express a connection to one particular faith, though he
mentioned that he attends Quaker meetings. Thomas shared,

I am not a creedal person. I’ve been going to a Quaker meeting for a while now,
and if you know anything about the Quakers, it’s like, creeds, doctrines, all that
stuff are secondary at best to direct religious experience.

And later in the interview,

I’m feeling more and more connected to, not only the spirituality, Quaker
spirituality, but also the peace movement that they’ve been a part of in the world.

I interpret that spirituality that is connected to global unity is important to Thomas,
though strict religious doctrine is currently not. Thomas related a journey through his
stories which brought him to this point of belief.

Through the participant review process, Thomas agreed that his meaning
framework centers on a search for belongingness. He seemed to put forth effort to
understand his parents’ histories and has had other experiences where he transitioned
from being an outside observer to a member of the group. For example, he suddenly
found himself deeply affected by an experience when he participated in a group visiting
Auschwitz.

Thomas labeled himself as intuitive and this shows from his stories: he was open
to receive suggestions from the people around him whom he perceived as trustworthy. He
made decisions accordingly to what he felt was the right path for the moment. This point
is demonstrated in the following story about his connection with a college advisor.

She was the German professor. So I go and see her and she’s sort of, she’s
tall, she’s a very round person, to me she has this motherly persona. I just wanted
to hug her the first time I saw her. She’s like someone you just want to hug. She
was so sweet and gentle and she’s such a profound scholar, and we were talking
about my schedule, and I had a foreign language requirement. I was like, “I think
I want to take German.” I don’t know why. I had such a bad experience with
foreign languages growing up. And it’s strange because I have a real facility with
foreign languages, but I always had trouble learning them in school, middle
school, not so much but high school. I was awful.

But anyway, so this thing, studying German, and she was telling me,
“Yeah, I’m the German professor and it’s gonna be a great experience and I really
encourage you to do that,” and I just felt safe with her, maybe that’s why I did it.
And then she’s like, “You know, maybe you’ll take a course in philosophy or
something.” Her husband was the chair of the department. I was like “OK, that
sounds interesting,” and it just seemed where I wanted to go. I didn’t know it as
much.

And that’s how, those were the two trajectories of my undergraduate
career, and it’s just so – I know I did that partly because I was curious about each,
but also because I really trusted these two people. I guess there is this element of
trust in all my stories, of feeling safe with people, really being influenced by role
models and people I admire,

The above narrative reveals Thomas’ reliance on his “gut intuition.” He is immediately
taken by the motherliness of his advisor and is willing to heed her advice about what
courses to take. Still what his advisor suggested resonated with him also (“and it just
seemed where I wanted to go.”) and thus he was able to pursue her suggested avenues of
study. He did not follow blindly.

Thomas seemed to be aware that experiencing meaning is dynamic and he has
severed ties with the Catholic path to pursue a different path in a PhD counselor
education program with a religion and spirituality focus. The meaning he first found in
the Catholic faith shifted for Thomas. Recurring in his stories are the metaphors of
coming home and being seen.

Kate

Kate is a Caucasian woman in her early 40's. She is a mother of 4 children living in Virginia and is divorced. Kate has a successful therapy private practice. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program in Counselor Education. Kate considers herself a Catholic, though she was not born as such. She did not speak of her family’s faith tradition. As for spirituality Kate focused on letting go and letting God take control, which she considered to be more of a Buddhist philosophy. Kate revealed her spiritual life philosophy to me when I asked about her journey to open to the inevitability of divorce.

Just letting go of preconceived things, being Buddhist about it, letting go of the attachment, the ideas of what I thought I was, what I am, just clinging to the other I AM, and taking that one step at a time, not being insistent upon knowing everything all at once, there was just a lot of going from trying really hard, going from the beginning, coming up with a safe formulaic, predictable, what looks right on the outside way of approaching life to just saying, “Oh well, no more book, no more formula,” and really believing that I’m still a child of God, still faithful, still trying to be faithful, and still realizing that there was a place in this world, or job for me to do in this world.

The above paragraph highlights some aspects of Kate’s understanding of the world she inhabits. She has turned her back on the perspective that the world is knowable and manageable by following certain rules. She has learned to embrace the uncertainty of life by trusting in a God that is a loving parent.

Kate's early history has elements of trauma. Her stories seem to be focused on shedding her conservative belief of who she is and boldly jumping into the unknown to rediscover what is meaningful to her. As evidenced from her statement above, “there was just a lot of going from trying really hard, going from the beginning, coming up with a
safe formulaic, predictable, what looks right on the outside way of approaching life to just saying, ‘*Oh well, no more book, no more formula ...*’” Her greatest leap seemed to be in leaving her husband and the security that he provided her and her children.

Kate referenced many biblical and other pointed stories in her sharing. She stated that, “these stories that I carry with me, are more like compass points,” with which she directs her life journey.

Kate’s stories were hard to separate out. She seemed to share in one connected flow. Her telling style was unique to this pool of participants. She started her sharing from the most current period of her life and then worked backward, sometimes jumping between periods. Upon reflection, I surmised that her nonlinear storytelling might be a protective mechanism for Kate to share a little about her childhood trauma with an assured sense of safety.

*Louis*

Louis is a Jewish Caucasian gay male in his mid-fifties. He works as a cognitive behavior therapist in the Washington DC metro area and is the youngest of three brothers. Louis was born in the suburbs of Detroit and seems to have struggled with the theme of shame for a large part of his youth in relationship to his sexual orientation. Louis suffered from judgments by his family and his community and seemed to have internalized the message that gay people are, “evil,” and, “deranged.”

And unlike a lot of people I didn’t question whether I was gay. I hated that I was gay, but I didn’t have any doubt. I started having sex at 12, so it was pretty clear, with a Hebrew school buddy. I felt so much shame by that whole experience that— It was one thing struggling to keep up with my brothers, but here was a way in which I felt like, I just couldn’t, you know the whole expectation was that [unintelligible] marriage [unintelligible]. I mean, I figured I would do all that, but I kind of also figured that this was not gonna work.
Or at least this would be really hard to make it work, I don’t think I knew at that point that it wasn’t gonna work, but I just thought, “Oh, God, this is awful” and I had a very strong sex drive then and it was all vanilla non-abusive stuff, but the sex drive would lead us to get together and have sex, this friend and I, and the shame that would happen immediately after orgasm and then lasting until the sex drive built up again. Days or weeks later led to the cycle of distancing.

Louis often returned to this theme of his sexuality and the negative associations that went along with being gay. He appeared to be lost in a world of sexual behavior before he really understood his identity. Louis grew up in a culture where there were no gay role models and anyone telling him that he was “normal.” As the interview moved on, he found the courage to come out as gay and to learn to accept who he is. The sense of shame never was completely healed, as demonstrated by the following summary of Louis’ relationships.

So I had this one guy who I didn’t love but liked, but we were never even that good friends, who I was having sex with and terribly ashamed of, and another guy who I was absolutely in love with, who I had a perfectly healthy relationship with, but because I was romantically in love with him, I was ashamed of that too. In both cases they involved patterns of distancing, and being drawn to the person for reasons, in one case because of emotion and in the other case because of libido, but in both cases there were the feelings would draw me to him and the shame with pushing away.

It would seem that Louis’ default emotion in connection with sexuality is shame. He explained that his current goal in life is, “is working on acceptance.”

Part of Louis’s life narrative involves a conversion to Christianity as he adopted Jesus as a god for outcasts. Louis seemed to identify strongly with this label of outcast and also meaningful to him is the spiritual theme of liberation from the Exodus story in the Bible. Lately, Louis has reclaimed his Jewish identity as a home that accepts him as a gay man.
Louis's meaning seemed to stem from him being of service to those in need. He spent time in the 70's advocating for Central American human rights and in local crisis intervention. In the 80’s Louis worked with people who were living with HIV and AIDS and then decided to open up a private practice. Louis 's narrative voice is littered with negative phrases about himself and gay people in general. For example, he related, “The only stuff I knew about gay people was that they were sick, depraved, hated people.” I reasoned that Louis has internalized years of cultural homophobia.

As balance to Louis’ low self-esteem, there I also heard stories of hope and courage. Louis struggles and triumphs at living authentically and in stable mental health. He expressed the following about his sense of meaning as it relates to God and service.

I’ve never lost a sense of purpose and meaning and direction in my life, that comes through a relationship with God, and also comes through a sense that as long as I’m doing something worthwhile for other people, and it took me a while to accept and for me too, but at least for other people, then there’s something worthwhile going on in my life. There’s something that's, that's about my worth ... there’s meaning and purpose in my life. And that has held with me to this day.

Bella

Bella is a Jewish Caucasian female in her mid 60's. She works as a school counselor in a progressive Jewish elementary school in the Metro DC area. She is the mother of two adult children and a grandmother. Bella very much values her role as a mother and maintains a good relationship with her daughters. She said the following about the significance for her of being a mother,

Interviewer: So before we move on, what is it about being a mother that’s significant to you?

Bella: Everything. It is probably the most core experience that a person can have, I think, being a parent. It is a commitment that one makes, and it doesn’t end until you drop dead. It goes on forever. It doesn’t matter if your children are adults, which mine are now. I suppose, looking back on this now, it defined me
as a person in a way that I wanted to be defined. I always did want to have children, and it defined me; I was a mother, I believed I was good at it, I enjoyed it, and it provided an opportunity for emotional intimacy with two people in a way that I probably had not experienced—well, except with my own parents and brother. It was … this was my family. I became responsible in a way I never had to before, and I had to organize my life around other people in a way I didn’t need to before. And I would say that becoming a mother was probably the first time in my life that I felt that I was well-defined, and that my life had real meaning.

Bella equated having meaning with being able to label herself, or having a fixed role.

Mothering provided that kind container that Bella chose to be in. The role of wife, on the other hand was a label that Bella ultimately rejects.

So I did love being a mom. I could just spend the entire day, every day, just sitting on the floor playing with my kids. And I didn’t love being married. I knew I wouldn’t love being married. I would tell my mother when I was an adolescent that I wanted to have children but I really didn’t want a husband. And that was unthinkable in those days, shocking.

Bella also has a close relationship with her younger brother, whom she considers her "bottom line," go to person.” Bella shared that her, “search for meaning came about with the dissatisfaction of my conventional and ultimately meaningless lifestyle, and in the course of this, my approach to parenting took a very different turn.”

When Bella was in her late twenties, after the birth of her daughters, she divorced her husband as she realized that she did not want to be married (as mentioned in the above excerpt). From there she began a journey across the U.S. to find her community and also to find herself. She grew up with certain values that she felt were not her own. She exclaimed, “The values that were bestowed upon me that really were not my own.” Bella needed to leave conventional life behind to discover the values that she believed in.

Bella moved to North Carolina and Oregon and became a “hippie.” She home-schooled her daughters in their early years and learned how to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. Bella stressed in her participant check that becoming a “hippie” was
connected to the discovery of her spiritual self. Eventually she took up sewing and began a small business which enabled her to get off welfare. Later Bella landed a job as a teacher in a Headstart program and worked for a grant which enabled her to go into the homes of children to help teach parenting skills to the children's caretakers.

Through this experience Bella discovered that she had a passion for early intervention parenting skills. After 10 years of living away from conventional society, Bella moved back to a big city to get a MA degree which focused on early childhood development and working with high risk families. Bella has worked in agencies for high risk families and in the last 15 years as an elementary school counselor.

Another transition-journey for Bella was becoming Bat Mitzvah at age 60. The Bat Mitzvah is the Jewish rite of passage the traditionally occurs at age 12 for girls. She chose to prepare herself for this Jewish rite of passage, reading from the Torah in traditional melody, or trope. This milestone was affirmed for Bella when she had a mystical encounter, seeing her deceased maternal grandfather hovering over her. She was given a feminized version of this grandfather's father’s name.

Bella placed great emphasis on relationships as the core source of her personal meaning, first and foremost being her relationship with God. She uses the Hebrew name Hashem [The Name] as reference for the Divine. She shared the following about her relationship with Hashem after her Bat Mitzvah.

It was such a defining process and moment. It was as if my commitment to Hashem, my relationship with Hashem, became—became. And I really had no words for what that was, and how joyous it was. But there was no question that I was in the state of grace during that weekend.

As evidenced by Bella having her Bat Mitzvah at age 60, she appears to find meaning in living her life according to her own personal pace and time schedule. She is aware of
societal pressures though appeared very apprehensive of just going with the cultural flow. She valued taking risks and jumping into the unknown. This way of being seemed to have paid off for Bella.

Thina

Thina is a 24-year-old female working at a DC-based architecture firm. Her main focus in the field of architecture is on environmental building. She is of mixed racial descent, as her mother is from Taiwan, and her father is from the US. Thina grew up in a privileged family with a very strong work ethic and focus on success. Thina shared that her mother is a very business-savvy woman who Thina finds overbearing at times. In one of Thina’s story she reflected on the meaning of seeing herself as a leader. Interestingly, being a leader is something that she has not been too comfortable with because of that quality’s association with her mother.

Because my mom is very, she’s a leader, and she’s kind of bossy, and she’s a very intimidating person, so I’d always been kind of afraid of inhabiting her business-savvy qualities, because she eeked it out of me with her dominating

Thina expressed that she is more comfortable relating with her father. Her family is Catholic, though Thina does not seem to engage actively in her faith. Her relationship to her faith tradition is captured in the following excerpt.

Interviewer: And you said you were Catholic?

Thina: Yes.

Interviewer: But do you go to church regularly, or?

Thina: I don’t. I’ll go on holidays, and I made up something I’ll do for Lent. So it’s not like I’m boycotting, but. There are some things, I’m not entirely sold maybe on the whole thing.

Interviewer: S-O-L-D, not S-O-U-L-E-D.
Thina: Right.

Interviewer: [Laughter] So you don’t take communion regularly right now.

Thina: Well, I wasn’t for a while, so I didn’t—I think it was like Christmas mass, not this year [unintelligible] my sister, who was younger, she’s 8 years younger, she looked at me, and she was like, “Why aren’t you taking communion?” And I think I said something like, “Don’t question me,” because I was really surprised by her saying that. And I think after that, when I go, I take communion. And I think I’ve had a few, I think I’ve been sort of coming back, but in a really lazy way. But I never [unintelligible] went away, I just stopped going church, but. It’s something where I don’t really feel strongly about where I am in my religion, I guess. It’s not a big deal to me that I’m not in it. But I’m not rejecting it either.

Thina glazed over her early years in terms of meaning. She appeared to find meaning in her more recent experiences that are either connected with clarity for a career path or stories where she catches a glimpse of herself as a strong, confident, level-headed, and independent person in the world. Thina's more significant stories have a theme of horror and shock to them. She related a story about witnessing a traumatic accident and another narrative about a being terrified of a ghost. My sense as the listener was that it was necessary for her meaningful stories to be interesting to me. Her stories demonstrated her leadership ability to deal with challenging situations. Thina shared that she told these types of stories because, she explained, “I can honestly say that in this kind of situation, this is how I would react, rather than saying this is how I’d like to react.”

Thina's interview seemed to be a meaning-making process in itself. It seemed that having Thina tell some of her early stories and then asking follow-up questions helped Thina to see how events fit together in her life and what lessons from past experiences have stayed with her. The interview seemed insightful for Thina. (This point will be further elucidated in chapter 5 in the Ramification for Counseling subsection.)

Thina ended the interview sharing that a change might be coming along soon. She
expressed uncertainty about her direction and gave an impression that she was unclear how her current job was actually contributing to the green movement and to the world. Thina seemed to be in a process of considering steps towards a more meaningful vocational choice. She agreed with the interpretation that she might be lacking a space to truly express those qualities in herself that she gets excited talking about – being a leader, keeping cool in crisis, and facing her fear head on.

*Aria*

Aria is a 23-year-old, “multiracial woman of color,” who lives in the DC Metro area. She was born into an economically lower-class family and has one younger brother. Aria’s father is African American and her biological mother is Caucasian. Early in Aria’s life, she was separated from her parents and went to live with other family members. Aria's mother was sentenced to prison which has severed their mother-daughter bond completely. She related the following about her biological parent’s history,

My father and my biological mother met in basic training in [name of city]. They married, moved to [name of state] where B.’s family is from. She’s B., she’s not my mother, she’s my biological mother. That’s the extent of it.

Aria's father was wrongly accused and served a shorter sentence. Aria was reunited with her father when he served his sentence, and he has become a hero in Aria’s eyes, as a model of overcoming challenges and a constant source of inspiration. She described in detail the care he provided for Aria and her brother as a single father.

And he began going to school ... going to school full time. And he began investing a lot of time in his health. He started doing 1,000 situps and 1,000 pushups every day. He set up a stationary bike in the apartment, he ran every day, he had a room that was dedicated to weight lifting, and becoming as strong and as focused as he could be. And while he was working on that, and I don’t remember if he had a job or if we were on government assistance at that time, every weekday, at 4 PM, the three of us would have milk and cookies, and we would go to the TV and watch *The Cosby Show*, which was on channel 44, every weekday.
And there were many things like that, but I guess that’s one little snapshot. And he would read to us—he would read to me every night. And if he wasn’t too tired, we’d get to ride on his back, he’d be the horsie, into our bedroom. I remember ... he was this strong, athlete guy, he was going back to school, and he was very gentle, played a maternal role in our lives.

The above excerpt points to why her sense of meaning is connected with a sense of self-worth and validation. I would argue that Aria sees her personal success as proof of her father’s greatness. In other words, her personal story gives meaning to her family’s story.

Aria’s adopted mother came into her life when she was a young girl and raised Aria as Unitarian Universalist Christian. Thus, today she identifies as Unitarian Universalist, though spiritually her beliefs align with Buddhist philosophy as well. She is actively engaged in non-profit work, after a successful college career. Because of her and her parent’s hard work, Aria’s family has managed to escape the cycle of poverty.

In terms of meaning, Aria’s meaning seems to stem from struggling with the way she witnessed her father overcoming suffering and discrimination throughout his life. She drew meaning from the fact that her father was able to nurture and love her even with immense obstacles in the way, as demonstrated in the segment in the paragraph above.

Aria’s stories showed that she also values her relationship with her adoptive mother (referred to as Mommy) and showed great gratitude for how her mother changed her life for the better. Aria has a survivor mentality – she has the self perception that she has overcome great adversity. Aria shared the following story to demonstrate how her adoptive mother impacted her life.

Aria: Mommy was in our lives, and at this point she moved back ... and in my 3rd grade picture I was wearing this beautiful jacket, beautiful fancy jacket with all these different colors. It was a zip-up. Indoors, you know, jacket, and she’d French-braided my hair, and my posture was straight and I’m smiling. And I was pretty and I was proud of myself.
Interviewer: So what’s the meaning?

Aria: That my mother changed my life. And there was a big, huge 180 shift in my self-image. And my life trajectory.

Her family moved a lot while she was growing up. She quickly learned that she could excel academically, and has held on to that belief about herself. In 4th grade Aria was called “Teacher’s pet.” Rather than an insult Aria took that taunt as a compliment.

She reflected

And years later, my junior year of high school, or maybe it was even senior year, my two friends were like, “Oh, it was so hard, we were called teacher’s pet,” and I was like, “That was one of the best moments of my childhood. You think that’s a bad thing because you were never the stupid kid. Because at least when you’re teacher’s pet, you can think, ‘Hm, I’m going to college and I’m going to have a successful life,’ you know, not the stupid kid who everybody ignores and there’s shame, and what do you have to say, oh—What, what? Please. That’s awesome. You don’t even know how lucky you were.” But I knew how fantastic that was. I was the teacher’s pet.

Aria's drive to achieve seems to have completely overshadowed the discrimination that she experienced as a young woman of color. Aria spoke about achievement as being goal directed and simultaneously open. She perceived herself as being lucky, living in the flow of success, and described how things just seem to come together for her.

When asked about a story of meaninglessness, Aria related that she felt guilty and confused about how she was able to achieve so much in her life, while her parents, who have worked so hard, were not able to reach the same status. She borrowed the term, "survivor's guilt," to classify this particular relationship with her success in life. Aria considered meaninglessness as not fully understanding how she has managed to reach her current level of achievement. She expressed a lack a sense of coherence about the flow of her life events. (See chapter 7, Facets of Meaninglessness subsection.)
Lee

Lee is a 26-year-old Latino Trans male. He works on policy in the Washington, DC area. Lee comes from a low-income family. At a very young age, Lee learned the importance of organizing community and standing up for one's own rights. He would often escort his father around town as they tried to save their tenant complex from being closed down. Lee's father left the family when Lee was in grade school. He was raised mostly by his mother on the West coast. Lee was born Catholic, but turned away from church because of its discriminating policies against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) people. He currently is exploring Judaism because it seems to have been the religion of supportive people in his life and he is drawn to its message of social justice.

Lee proved to be an imaginative child, and relied on his imagination to find comfort in a mostly neglected household. He shared about how he would imagine that the kitchen table was his fort and that he could spend hours playing in the safe space that it provided. When I asked Lee about the source of his wisdom to create he safe space, he answered,

I think I was always really imaginative, and I would always play for hours on my own, come up with amazing plays and stories with my stuffed animals, and I always had my space where I could just be creative, and it made me feel safe, it made me feel happy, and I think my imaginative side really needed a space, a retreat, to play.

His reliance on creative solutions became crucial for Lee as later in his life he dealt with homelessness and discrimination. In grade school, Lee was diagnosed with dyslexia and often felt ridiculed for not being able to read.

After Lee came out as gay in middle school, he suffered physical and emotional
abuse from his older brother. When the situation in his house became clearly unsafe, Lee chose to live homeless, staying with various friends and occasionally on the streets. He described himself as a leader, and Lee became involved in youth activism early on and took a stance against people who ridiculed others. Lee moved in with his partner in high school and basically lived an independent life at an early age. The following is one example of how Lee stood up for himself and other people throughout his life narrative.

So I came out in middle school. And it wasn’t bad, really, mainly because when other people came up to me and said, “You’re gay? That’s gross,” I’d be like, Yeah, I’m gay, what’s the big deal? Whatever. She’s gay too, he’s gay…” After I came out a bunch of people came out. I had a bunch of friends that were also gay …

Lee was accepted with a full scholarship to a prominent all women's college in New England. In college, Lee came out as Trans and began to use male pronouns. Lee lost friends over this decision though began to learn how to behave in order to fit in with the elite class. He found it more challenging to be himself in college than when he was growing up. Lee was surprised that the educated class could be more intolerable than the low-income community of his youth.

Yeah, and I had known from my work, from a very young age, classism, racism, and all of that. But [Name of College] was a school where it was supposed to be safe to be gay, and safe to be who we were, but it wasn’t safe. And that made me laugh, because I knew at that moment that it would be just as much of a struggle, if not more, as being homeless in Oregon.

He felt discriminated against for being Trans even by the Lesbian community.

Lee shared that in his current job he values growing up in poverty because it gives him an edge in the policy world to really understand the needs of the population that he trying to help. Lee's stories showed an individual who appeared completely integrated between his actions and who Lee is as a person. He has found meaning in his life
challenges by using them as fuel to work harder for justice and equality. When reflecting on meaningfulness, Lee expressed that it is hard to find meaning in a society which does not recognize his gender, which is neither male nor female.

I think for me it’s very difficult in this world around gender issues, and feeling strong and confident, and feeling like I have a purpose and meaning, when the world doesn’t recognize me as a gender, is a very difficult struggle. And a struggle finding meaning even though I do not fit into one of the primary genders that is accepted by society. Every time I walk into a bathroom or every time I have to go across the mechitza [gender divider in traditional Jewish prayer spaces], in divided gender lines, by my biological assigned gender, I feel like I lack meaning, that my meaning is taken away. It’s hard for me to be empowered when I don’t even have a box to check or a bathroom to go to that I feel signifies who I am. Even though I try to talk myself up and try to empower myself, that I have space, or I have meaning, I feel like I lack meaning when I’m in gender-divided spaces.

Lee's being seems to carry a powerful message of where society's idea of tolerance still needs to grow.

Daryl

Daryl is 48-year-old African American gay male living in the DC Metro Area. He was born into a poor working class family in the South Side of Chicago. Daryl has a degree in social work and works as a manager and supervisor in the social service field. He is the father of two sons in their twenties and has two granddaughters. Currently, Daryl is being faced with his father's terminal illness and is contemplating the cycle of life and death as a way to cope with his father’s inevitable passing.

Now that my dad’s terminally ill, I think about the circle of life, and I tell myself no one comes here to stay. So that kind of helps me deal with the inevitable—eventually he’s gonna pass, he’s gonna make his transition.

His personal meaning involved the connection with his family and has made it a goal to pass the value of family connection along to his children. Daryl stated the following,
I make myself available to my children. I tell them that I love them all the time. My youngest son and I, we'll go out and have a beer. He just turned 22. We were out about a month or so ago, and he was like, “Dad, I really enjoy our time together. We’re gonna have to do this at least twice a month, or three times a month,” I was like, “Well OK, let’s just try once a month, I know you got a girlfriend, you got a baby.” He was like, “Well, OK, don’t forget, this is our time.” And he's gone to the bars with me. And he was like, “Cool.” And I’m really proud of him—he’s doing the best he can in the situation he has. And to him, his family, his daughter, everything, and that’s what I try to instill into him. Family, family, family.

Growing up, Daryl described himself as being isolated from his large family of 13 siblings. He excelled at school, though could not seem to find a place for himself in his community which was very rough, filled with violence and substance abuse. Daryl understood that education was his ticket away from that toxic environment. He married young and joined the navy which allowed him to see the world.

Daryl spoke about his father like a personal hero. He expressed that his father is a blessing in his life, as his father was always there for him and worked hard to support his family. Daryl emphasized,

That he’s a man of his word, that he loves his family unconditionally, that he’s committed to us. And to me, I don’t know if you can ask much more than that from a human being, I really don’t. I’m just in awe of him, I really am.

Many of Daryl’s stories emphasized how much he cherishes their relationship.

In his late 20's Daryl divorced his wife, as he found her to be a stumbling block for reaching his personal goals. He also fell in love with a man and came out as gay. Daryl spoke little of any struggle to come out, though he expressed total acceptance by his parents. Daryl shared that he aspires to show his children the same amount of love that his father has shown him. He stated that he will always be a, "very strong bridge," for his children.
Talking About Meaning

In the above subsection I summarized the narrative interviews of the 12 participants that took part in the current study. I attempted to capture some of the main events that affected the picture of personal meaning that unfolded in each interview. As the reader can see, the lives of the participants overlap in some ways. The younger people in the study are mostly trying to figure out their next moves (Edward, Thina, Aria, and Evan); a few of the participants took a huge leap by leaving their spouse for an alternative lifestyle (Daryl, Kate, and Bella). The participants are educated and would be considered well-adjusted by society’s standards. Still, I have met with 12 different people with 12 unique stories and different compositions of meaning in their lives. Before I continue to address the different kinds of narratives that expressed meaning, I will explore the complexity that is evident when trying to expound on personal meaning.

Trying to be consistent when speaking about meaning presents a challenge. There are many phrases that are used in meaning theory that overlap with one another. An incomprehensive list includes: meaning-making, meaning-seeking, finding meaning, searching for meaning, uncovering meaning, discovering meaning, creating meaning, and experiencing meaning. I have attempted to be very intentional in my use of meaning terminology.

Meaning-making and meaning-seeking are both terms that were used and defined by Wong (2008), thus I will follow his lead in the uses of those phrases. In my analysis, I will define what discovery and creation of meaning mean in light of the narratives recorded. I have used finding meaning and other unexplained terms as generic terminology and for stylistic variety. As will be explained in chapter 6, I will argue for
the removal of the term, “search for meaning,” and thus have only used that phrase with corresponding theory. With the above caveat said, I will now continue to outline the meaning story types.

Meaning Story Types

The holistic-content approach to narrative inquiry enabled a thematic analysis of the complete narratives themselves. Table 3 presents what types of stories participants tell when they speak about meaning. The rationale behind looking at a story type analysis and the detailed procedure that I used is presented in chapter 3. In past literature lists have been made to categorize where people draw meaning from (Wong, 1998). In the current study I considered at length how those pre-constructed categories fit the themes of the stories of the participants. I identified 18 story themes. Many of the stories fit into more than one category and some of the categories had high overlap. If a story type had even one story that was unique to it was kept as a category. From the 12 participants a total of 80 stories were categorized.
### Table 3

**Summary of Story Types for 12 participants and their relationship to categories from Wong’s (1998) Personal Meaning Profile**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Type</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
<th>Theme of the Type</th>
<th>PMP Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Vision of Self</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Narrator learned something new about themselves or experienced a personal transformation</td>
<td>Self-acceptance and Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation of Self from Others</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Narrator felt validation from the external world.</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering the Harsh Reality of Life</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Narrator encountered something difficult about the world that challenges their worldview.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values to Live By</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Exemplifies an important quality or moral in a person's life.</td>
<td>Self-transcendence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Struggle</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Challenge that usually stemmed from an internal conflict.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroic Influence</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Story about a significant positive person in one’s life.</td>
<td>Intimacy and Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate Love and Relationships</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Story about love between family, friends, or significant partners.</td>
<td>Intimacy and Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with Harsh Reality or Challenges</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Narrator dealt with a challenging life situation. Mostly involved positive coping mechanisms.</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissal of Self by Others</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Experience of being unheard or rejected leads them to question their place in the world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic Experience</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Experiencing or witnessing any kind of traumatic event.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss and Grieving</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lost contact with a significant person in their life either due to death, divorce, moving, or a personal transition.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success and Goal Attainment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Story relating an accomplishment.</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship and Fellowship</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Spending time with friends and the importance of friendship in one’s life.</td>
<td>Intimacy and Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capturing the Time Period</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Story that gave the listener a good idea of what that particular time in the narrator's life was like.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Conversion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>A religiously themed transition in one's life.</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson in Humility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Narrator learned a lesson in humility.</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifice of Own Needs for Another</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Narrator had to give of themselves for another, despite consequences to their personal ideals.</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants in this study were well-adjusted individuals who mostly expressed a positive sense of meaning in their lives. Participants who were not as well-adjusted or who expressed a negative sense of personal meaning could be expected to have told different types of stories. According to the above breakdown the two major story types were narrations about seeing oneself in a new light (*New Vision of Self*) and being seen by others as worthy (*Validation of Self from Others*). It is interesting to note that the *New Vision of Self* type is an internally focused experience and the *Validation of Self from Others* type is externally focused. In the assertion of meaning that I will show throughout this project, the meaning that is created and discovered through the interaction between internal and external worlds will become evident.

*New Vision of Self* can also be looked at as conversion stories, though not a religious-based conversion. In the perspective of William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901/1936), the presence of *New Vision of Self* stories suggests that the participants of this study can be considered, “Twice-born” type, as opposed to “Once-born” type. As seen from the participant summaries, the individuals in this study have not lived life in a simple question-less attitude toward the world around them. Their stories revolve around reinventing themselves or shattering their selves because of an inability to fit gently into the world framework that they were born into. Examples of this unrest can be seen in Daryl’s reaction to a toxic environment and Kate’s reaction to limiting roles for women. Except for Yarran (as will be discussed throughout the next 3 chapters), all of the participants are concerned with ever-expanding personal meaning as they continue to experience the world. It can be concluded that I would have heard different kinds of
stories from different sources of meaning expressed if there were more “Once born” type participants in the study.

It seems clear that experiencing a dramatic shift in one’s life is meaningful and that stories of meaning would emphasize those growth experiences. The following is an excerpt from a *New Vision of Self* story told by Bella.

And B.S. was so pivotal, the experience of B.S. was so pivotal. If the chapter before was finding myself as a person in community and before that, a spiritual being, this was finding my intellect. I was 40 years old, and for the first time in my life, realized I was a smart person. How do you get to be 40 and not know that you’re smart, if you are smart, right? For the first time in my life I was in school because I wanted to be in school, it was the school I wanted to be in, and everything was so new and exciting.

In the story Bella reflected on her decision to attend a certain college for her M.A. degree. Returning to school when she was ready allowed her to see that she was smart; a discovery she felt she waited to long for. I will present another story from Bella that is a *Validation of Self by Others* story type. This excerpt was shared after I asked about the significance of a mystical encounter with her deceased grandfather.

Oh. It was like I was fulfilling my soul’s mission for that moment in time. And he was there, loving me in a way he always did, and blessing me. And just kind of enveloping me. It was so—it was one of the more prominent mystical experiences I’ve had. (There was one other time that he came to me. I was very sick, he came to me twice. My mother has shared, since then, that there are times when she has been in deep stress, where she has actually seen him also. So he is able to do this.) But the significance of it was that it was like coming into my own, but coming into—it was like, I had this heritage. I was named for his father. He was a rabbi. There was something that was supposed to happen for me in this lifetime around that. And I think that he was acknowledging it, he was supporting it, he was ... who knows.

While the first Bella story was classified as both a *Validation* and *New Vision of Self* story. This latter story was classified only as *Validation* because it gave Bella a sense of certainty that she was on the right path. There was not element of her discovering
something new.

After those story types, we have two story types that deal with meaning in a situation that involves external conflict (Encountering Harsh Realities) or internal conflict (Internal Struggle). In between the narratives of conflict there are stories that exemplify an important lesson or moral in a person's life (Values to Live By). Stories about values also had the added quality of a lesson learned that was relevant over time. Thomas’ story about a teacher in high school demonstrates this story type.

She always impressed upon us the fact that, “You are privileged, and you are lucky, and you are not the majority of the people of this country, you have resources most people don’t have.” It was the first time I ever really heard that from anyone. I guess my parents had always talked about that with us, because they came from sort of humble beginnings and they never wanted us to feel like we could expect or feel entitled to anything, but anyway.

I was really moved by her because she challenged us in that way. I’d never been challenged in that way before, I’d never been able to, I’d always, all my friends for the most part were really, really, really wealthy, and we were well-off, we were probably middle [unintelligible] or upper class, but I always sort of felt, I don’t know if inferior’s the right word, but I always knew that there was a substantial difference between us in that way. And she called it out, she named it, no one else had done that.

The value of the recognizing where Thomas fit in with the social economic scheme of society had a lasting impact on him.

Following that story type are stories about Heroic Influence or Intimate Love and Relationships. These types both deal with significant people in a person’s life. In Heroic Influence stories the participant seems to elevate the main character and Intimate Love and Relationships stories are about the simple appreciation for caring and tenderness in one’s relationships. The middle ranking themes deal with both positive (Coping with Harsh Reality or Challenges, Success and Goal Attainment, and Friendship and Fellowship) and negative (Dismissal of Self by Others, Traumatic Experience, and Loss
and Grieving) aspects of life. It was interesting to note that there were few stories that were categorized as Religious Conversion. It seems that for this particular sample people tended to continue to identify with their birth religions even if their ideologies differed from the tenants of that religion. Participants either lost touch with their practice of faith, found their own unique relationship with the sacred, or they are still searching for a religion to call home and a conversion may be on the way.

As I explained in chapter 3, I compared the story types to the categories of the Personal Meaning Profile (PMP) (Wong, 1998). The reason I did this was because Wong’s classification system grew out of a qualitative exploration, but now employs an empirical list of items. I wanted to see if using the empirical approach created a blind spot to the full picture of personal meaning. This relates to the overarching theme of this dissertation, which is to rescue more subtle types of meaning, that are rooted in the experience of being, from current day empirical meaning research.

I noticed that one of Wong’s seven categories did not appear on my list. I did not classify and story types in a way that would relate with the PMP category of Fair Treatment. This lack of category is probably due to the fact that the fair treatment category is a mindset about one’s life that might be experienced as meaningful. For example, an item scored for fair treatment is, I have received my fair share of opportunities and rewards. As I looked at story plots and not states of mind as meaningful it would make sense that I might not capture an individual having a sense that they had been treated fairly throughout their life.

Also noticeable is that several of the story types did not have a corresponding category with the PMP. This comparison suggests that a closed survey format limits our
understanding of the sources of meaning. The current types that do not seem to fit in with the PMP are stories where people made meaning out of a negative situation – stories about *Dismissal of Self by Others*, *Loss and Grieving*, and *Traumatic Experience*. Aria’s story of her father being beaten by the police is an example of a traumatic story which she draws meaning from.

Aria: But we came back, and ... I feel like she might have been outside, and was talking with neighbors. My mother was outside talking with neighbors, and something wasn’t right. I don’t even remember, but all I know was that my father was beaten by the police. He was dying at the time, he was very ill with hepatitis ... I don’t even remember where he was. I guess he was somewhere inside the house. Our dear family friends who were members of the synagogue, were so like family to us, drove all the way up from R., like a 25-minute drive, with their van, and all of us—maybe he’d already been taken to the hospital ... But he was badly beaten and he couldn’t see very well because they sprayed mace his face. The hospital was very close, it was like a mile away. But they drove out and took him to the hospital and comforted my mother and me and my brother, but they more comforted her, we just kind of went along for the ride, because we missed the actual thing, thank God. And that was one of the many painful experiences that all of us endured during my father’s illness.

*Interviewer:* So can you reflect a bit on the meaning of that story?

Aria: I’m not too fond of the police. I’m getting over it a bit ... And the personal meaning that it has for me is that racism is still alive and well. A lot of people don’t know about it, and I wouldn’t have a really good understanding of it if I hadn’t gone through that, so I have a heightened sense of awareness around issues about police brutality, so [unintelligible] the meaning that that has. [Pause] I’m thinking, because there are all kinds of things that—and, it’s something that I keep coming back to that it really changed my personal paradigm, much more so than my father. That was just kind of a shitty experience for him and he’s moved on. And that really changed how I see the world.

It might be argued that the story can fit in the Wong’s Self-acceptance category. The problem with that classification is that the element of trauma would be lost from the narrative. Aria did not just mature as a result of naturally being on the planet, rather her way of understanding the world changed as a result of an act of violence inflicted on a loved one. The PMP items only generally touch upon the meaning that is asserted from
negative experiences (*I have learned that setbacks and disappointments are an inevitable part of life*). The story types captured from this study give voice to meaning through trauma that is different from meaning through losing a loved one. Also, the story types capture meaning that might be part of a struggle that is, as of yet, unresolved, while the PMP items for *self-acceptance* have the conflict over with in the past.

Lastly stories about capturing the person in the moment do not have a home in the PMP (*Capturing the Time Period*). For example, Evan shared the following meaning stories from his first chapter period.

There's a story that, there’s stories of, when I was young, before memories have stuck we had a housekeeper that lived with us, and also had 2 children that lived with us, one of them was the same age as my sister R., and supposedly I used to stack up boxes in the kitchen to climb to get to the top shelves of desirable foods and I would stack them up and then I would send R. to get the food.

There was story of me riding down concrete steps with my tricycle, and other stories that only a fearless little boy could do, that first period ... let’s see, there is more.

There was a time when I was 5 that I would jump from consecutively higher stairs uh, and I asked my sister to move something that was in the way from this jump, and she did not move it, but I jumped anyway and I ended up getting stitches in my left temple, uh, and it was Friday night dinner, and my Father and I went to the hospital.

In chapter 5 the nuances of *meaning through being*, a raw experience of meaning will be explored. An underlying theme of this study is the respect of diversity in meaning. Because of the stress on diversity the data and discussion review began with showing the diverse stories that are told to exemplify meaning in the lives of individuals. This dissertation is based on the assumption that when people are sharing their life stories they are revealing a part of what they perceive as their core being. They are taking a stance to say, *this is who I AM*. The ability to share the sense of *I-AM-ness* or being-ness will
emerge as a crucial part of someone’s ability to experience their lives as meaningful. Thus, we will see stories that will be about all kinds of meaning.

There will be stories about the meaning of acceptance and there will be stories that are about the meaning personal growth. The key unifying factor to attend to is the underlying access to being that these stories facilitate for the narrator and also for the receiver. As you read the stories, allow them to touch a place within you that constantly exclaims I AM! and I exist! That is where you will find the meaning of this dissertation – to assert the unified being that is expressed through the infinite pathways of meaning through being.

Emergent Trends

Using the constant comparative method associated with Grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2006), I composed a list of possible trends. As described in fuller detail in chapter 3, the stories from each participant were considered for how they matched or contradicted an emergent trend, adding nuance and depth until the categories were saturated. The original list of trends, presented in the subsection below, consisted of 24 possible points to explore in depth. In the end, only five trends are fully presented. These specific trends are referred to as major themes. I decided on these five themes because they felt most alive to me across all the narrative interviews. That is to say, many of the stories resonated with these specific themes, more so than other identified trends. In the following subsection the original 24 trends are described. The major 5 themes will be presented throughout the remainder of the integrated results and discussion sections. In the original trends list, the five major themes are highlighted with italicized font.
Original Trends

1. Meaning through discovery leading to creation of meaning. It explores the possible relationship between discovery and creation of meaning.

2. Meaning through being, doing, and integration. Explores the relationship between meaning through being and doing throughout the narratives.

3. Meaning through choosing power labels. A subtheme to the theme of being and doing integration. Participants often came up with one word that captured either who they were at the time of the story or who they aim to be. The labels had doing and being meaning associations. May result in career choice, to represent not just what one wants to do, but also who they are wishing to be in the world.

4. Meaning through coping with mystery. Mystery emerged in several themes in connection with discovery of meaning and meaning through being. It emphasized the place for knowing and not knowing in personal meaning.

5. Meaning through reflecting on the past. Connected with all the major themes. It was noted that present personal meaning seems to be shaped by a person’s past experiences.

6. Meaning through the influence of another. Explored the relational quality of personal meaning. Participants often referred to the impact of others when they explored their own sense of meaning.

7. Meaning through the facets of meaningless in narratives. Another major theme. This theme will explore the many facets of meaninglessness that emerged in the stories. Not always shared as meaningless but as lack of self worth, self doubt, uncertainty with one's path.
8. Meaning through shedding beliefs about the self and the world. An extension of
the meaninglessness theme. Emphasizes the pattern of how participants needed to shed
their current identity in order to affirm a meaning identity that was more fitting for them.

9. Meaning through the interconnectivity of emotions and being. (Ramifications
for counseling theme.) Emphasizes the need to explore emotions as key to a person's
view of themselves and how they perceive an experience. When participants share their
stories they may relay information about their being in terms of what they were feeling at
the time. Attending to the emotional tone may lend insight into the meaning formation
process of the individual.

10. Meaning through the acknowledgment of Love as a statement about one's
being. This theme relates to the theme about emotions and being. It noted the experience
of Love in personal meaning.

11. *Meaning through encountering and expanding the Sacred.* Presented in the
five major themes. Explores the expansion of the idea of sacred in relation to the
experience meaning.

12. *Meaning through Willful versus Willing approaches to creating meaning.*
Explores the complexity of approaches to creating meaning in one’s life. It is another
major theme presented in full depth.

13. Meaning though learning a moral. Highlighted the importance of finding a
lasting teaching in an experience and how this in itself was meaningful in many stories.

14. Meaning though continuity of what was learned. Related to the meaning in
morals theme. It seemed that an experience was seen as personally meaningful if it
resulted in leaning a practical skill that had continued value.
15. Meaning though personal perspectives in sharing personal meaning. (Ramifications for counseling trend.) Explored the question why a person chose to share in a particular perspective. For example, stories may have been shared with a social justice focus, or a religious perspective. The theme opened up the question of how a person’s past experiences and current vocation impacted the telling of their stories.

16. Meaning though choosing one path and obliterating other life paths. Most participants described making a meaningful choice along their life path. It seemed that opening one door must inevitably close another. There seems to be existential angst around making choices that will obliterate other options.

17. Meaning though a Calling. Related to many of the ideas explored in the major themes. Calling seems to be a specific lens that expresses a moment of being/doing integration clarity.

18. Meaning though contemplating meaning integration. (Ramifications for counseling trend.) Acknowledges that participants seemed to make meaning when they were actively reflecting on who they were as a result of their actions in the world.

19. Meaning though the interview process. (Ramification for counseling trend). This theme is similar to the above theme of the impact of exploring meaning on integrating meaning. It emphasized the particular relevance of the current style of interview used. Participants seemed pleasantly surprised from the experience.

20. Meaning though searching for meaning. Many different attitudes and emotions were expressed in association with this search. The qualities of searching ranged from despair to experiencing the search as a challenge.

21. Meaning through witnessing the stories. (Ramifications for counseling trend.)
Part of the author’s transparency to share what was learned by bearing witness to the amazing stories of the participants. A section of the discussion section will be devoted to sharing these lessons.

22. Meaning though connecting one's individual story to a larger cultural narrative. Noted that certain participants from minority backgrounds seemed to find personal meaning in connecting their individual stories to their larger cultural story.

23. Meaning though being seen and validation. There seemed to be a prevalence of stories about participants finding meaning in being seen through external validation. This will be further explored in the section about story types.

24. Meaning though what we are experiencing in the present. Acknowledges that fact that participants shared in relationship to what was present for them in their lives at the time of the interview. Participants may have told different stories on a different day when they may have been involved in different life events.

Exploring the Research Questions

In the above sections of this chapter, I set the stage for an in-depth look at the philosophical concept of meaning and of related major themes that have emerged from an interpretive look at the stories. In the following three chapters, I will explore answers to the original research questions. The questions as listed in chapter 3 are:

1. What are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists (meaning through being)?

2. How might meaning-making and meaning-seeking play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?
3. How does one’s spiritual or religious life impact the interplay of meaning-making through action or meaning-seeking encountered as part of one’s pure existence?

I have devoted one chapter to each question in a format which blends presentation of results with discussion interspersed. This method of results-discussion presentation was chosen because it allows for a clearer understanding of how the meaning narratives demonstrate new learning and expansion of the theories that were reviewed in chapter 2. The second and third questions have actually evolved in light of the narratives collected. The reason for their shift will be explained in their respective chapters.
CHAPTER V
The Raw Experience of Meaning

This chapter deals with the first research question, *what are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists (meaning through being)?*

Similar to the study by Bauer & Bonnano (2001), which looked at action-oriented (*doing*), characterological-oriented (*being*), and integrative statements, I used the NVivo software to track these three types of statements. An explanation of the coding system that I used and the thinking behind my interpretation was presented in chapter 3. Since the participants were sharing stories that they perceived as meaningful, I reasoned that an action statement would be an indicator that the participant was speaking about *meaning through doing*. I considered characterological statements as indicative of *meaning through being*, and an integrative statement was seen as an indication of connecting *meaning through being* with *meaning through doing*. As suggested in the research question I considered the raw experience of meaning that is connected to the being of each individual. The raw experience of meaning is equated with *meaning through being*. I use the terms interchangeably. By following the use of being, doing, and integrative statements I was able to construct a theme which captures how participants reflect upon and utilize, or ignore, their most basic sense of raw personal meaning. Before looking at *being* in narratives it is important to discriminate between the concepts of being and identity.
Being and Identity

Beginning in the next section of this chapter I will present meaning-oriented “being statements,” as a way of investigating the presence and function of meaning through being in the life of 12 distinct individuals. A common question that arose from my dissertation committee review was: are you talking about being or identity? The dilemma, I propose, is that ultimately it is impossible to talk about being in a direct way since the individual exists within being. May & Yalom (2000) wrote about being as the “I-AM” Experience (p.274). They stated that it is difficult in our culture to even define being because we do function in the world from a place of doing. In our culture, we are that which we layer on top of our being. This might be, as an example, career identification or a role in a family. For further discussion about being the reader is referred back to chapter 2 where the philosophies of Heidegger (Kaufmann, 1975), Sartre (1956), Levinas (Lechte, 1994), Frankl (1962), and Tillich (1980), and Maslow (1968) are discussed.

For the purpose of this dissertation, that which we layer on top of being can be one’s identity. Identity is a socially constructed term that can change over a person’s life. Raggat (2006) wrote about the problem of attempting to capture identity in only one personal narrative because the internal human configuration is more complex. Therefore when we look at meaning through being in the following subsection, we will be looking at qualities of identity and personality that the individuals have deemed meaningful for themselves. The new learning of this study is that we can get a sense of the underlying and unchanging experience of I-AM by examining the meaningful qualities of identity. This idea is in tune with Sartre’s (1956) conception of meaning that is expressed through
being. I will show that when an individual emphasizes an aspect of their identity they are, in the same breath, asserting their primal experience and right to a sense of \textit{I-AM}. By doing so I am re-exposing the experience of meaning that reflects the awareness of being. I turn now to the first theme, \textit{Meaning through Being, Doing, and Integration}.

**Theme 1: Meaning through Being, Doing, and Integration**

Throughout the stories there were examples of participants sharing personal meaning through talking about doing or accomplishing something, and examples of meaning derived from the character of the narrator. “Doing statements” in the stories surfaced when the participants were speaking about things in their life that they had accomplished, either by working hard for, or perhaps things that just came naturally to them. It seemed that the participants readily shared the accomplishments which they were proud of. “Doing statements” also came in the form of wishes and desires for the future. Examples of doing excerpts follow. The specific “doing statements” are italicized for clarity.

What really, really caught my attention all of my friends were getting ready to graduate and I kept saying to myself, ‘I am not staying back with the stupid.’ So I found a school … for adults and youth who’ve had trouble in the D.C. public school system. I had made my mind up. I'm going to graduate with my class. \textit{I went, I took the entrance exam. They put me in my right grade. And six months later I walked across the stage and got my high school diploma with my class.} (Annie)

Annie shared about her meaningful experience of graduating from high school. As a therapist, I found myself noticing that implicit in her story is that she is capable of succeeding. However, the way she shared the above story does not show that she has internalized the meaning of being a capable person. While her accomplishment is definitely a great feat, the everlasting meaning can be found in the person who
accomplished. Thus she misses out on a fuller expression of her personal meaning by not experiencing the *I-AM* core being element. *Meaning through doing* was shared about as a pursuit. Yarran’s example, presented next, gave me the sense of the ceaseless nature of a meaning that is solely based in activity.

But, I had a very strong desire to finish school and do well. Um, I’ve wanted that more than, OK well, I’d say, you know, next to pursuit of certain women--I’m leaving something out, but I don’t remember. *Next to pursuit of certain women, I’ve wanted to do well in school more than I think, anything else, you know?* Like, out of all the things I wanted in life, like I -- You know, you--the things that are important to you in life are the things that you, you spend your time on, right? *So I spent my time on a lot of women, and I spent my time studying so much in college.*

Yarran shared about what gave his life meaning when he was in college, pursuing woman and getting good grades. His way of sharing this meaningful aspect also does not show any internalization of meaning. For example, he speaks about what is meaningful as what he spends his time on, and not on whom he is as a person in the world. There is also no end to his pursuit – one woman after another and one test after another. As the literature showed us (Emmons, 2003) constant pursuit is a necessary criterion of meaning, what is lacking here without *meaning through being* is a sense of ever arriving. The experience of feeling fulfilled in the moment is almost not an option since there is always another goal to pursue. I assert that the sole perspective of meaning as an everlasting pursuit should be balanced by the meaning that is present despite accomplishments. In a Judaic-Christian religion/spiritual sense, it is the teaching of 6 days of work followed by one day of rest.

The last example of *meaning through doing* is different from the above two because it is about meaning that Edward gets from hoping for a better future for himself
and his family. The example is seen as meaning through doing because Edward frames his hopes in terms of physical accomplishments.

“One of these days, hopefully, for C. and the kids and I, we can get a bigger house, and maybe somewhere either more in the woods, more in the mountains, or maybe closer to the ocean.”

By focusing solely on what he wants in the future Edward misses an opportunity to integrate that what he wants actually ties back to what he finds personally meaningful that may be available for him in the present moment. What is implied in Edward’s statement is that there is a part of his being that thrives when he is closer to the awesomeness of nature. Instead of reflecting on what he could do now to bring that into his life, he is stuck waiting for a future that many not come. Thus, meaning through doing can be disconnected from the present moment.

The presence of meaning through doing statements in the narratives support the assertion that meaning is intimately tied to a sustained sense of progress and that is can be disconnected from one’s being in the present moment. When I stopped to think about what the participants left out of their meaning picture, I learned more about them and was able to come up with a possibility that could potentially help them live with a fuller sense of personal meaning in the present moment. A possible conclusion that I consider is that the participants above could benefit from internalizing their meaning through doing, thus becoming more aware of their meaning through being.

“Being-” and “integrative statements”

If I only looked at doing statements in the narratives, I would be dismissing the raw meaning that that participants expressed by having an awareness of their being. By looking at “being-” and “integrative statements” I am rescuing the raw experience of
meaning that has seemingly been ignored in recent studies about meaning. (See chapter 2.) As discussed previously in the chapter introduction, the presence of “being statements” point to the presence of meaning through being. In the following excerpts “being statements” are italicized for clarity.

Um ... I was, something I should have mentioned earlier was, I have a very strong contrarian nature, or non mainstream deal um ... that it’s something, like growing up, if there is was a bar mitzvah and everybody’s dancing the same dance I couldn’t do it. It was impossible for me, it would drive me up the wall that everyone was dancing the same dance, conformity was evil in my estimation like there is nothing worse than being normal and normal is like everyone else, and what good is that … (Evan)

Evan shared a quality of his identity that he finds personally meaningful – “a strong contrarian nature.” I see this personal identification as meaningful because it seems to shape the way that he approaches life and makes decisions. By stating he has a contrarian nature he is revealing an essential motivator for his behavior in the world. The meaning through being is expressed by Evan concretizing his sense of I-AM in the world. He could have just told a story about not dancing at a party, but instead he takes a leap to pull something out of his being which for him is true and present in the moment. Evan used a “being statement” to tell a meaningful story and thus it is no longer just the story that is meaningful, but he too is meaningful.

The following excerpt is a sound example of an integrative narrative where Lee shared about a meaningful accomplishment and then reflected on what that accomplishment said about who he is as a person in the world.

I remember one time when I heard my friend J. had been harassed and bullied in PE, in the locker room, I stood up on the cafeteria table, and I told everyone that it wasn’t OK what they did to my friend, that they shouldn’t do that again, that if they did that again I was going to go to the principal and make sure that didn’t happen again. I remember doing that. And I’m sure it happened again, but I remember getting more respect, and I remember my friends being happy that
I did that, and it sort of made a group of people that, maybe we were stronger. I just remember all the kids being deers in the headlights, they didn’t know what to do, and the cafeteria workers not knowing what to do, and I just was this very strong-spoken kid that was saying that it wasn’t OK to harass people, that we had the right to be happy, and to be here, and that it’s not OK to look down on people because they’re different. (Lee)

Lee’s expressed meaning through doing by telling me about the experience of standing up for his friend. He related meaning through being by clearly acknowledging how his actions reflected his value for justice. I read Lee’s statement as saying that, something meaningful to my being is the importance of speaking out against mistreatment, and that is who I am, a fighter for justice. Justice-seeking is a quality of being that is present for Lee at every moment. When he stressed that fighting for justice is part of his perceived being, he tapped into his raw experience of meaning through being and gained access to a more holistic sense of personal meaning.

Below I will present another integration story that struck me powerfully in terms of a person sharing a meaning account that is centered on gaining awareness of their essential being-ness. The narrative will demonstrate how integration stories can be personal meaning revelations for the participants. They represent a moment of clarity, where a connection to being leads to a clear action-oriented sense of purpose. Evan shared the following story about taking a walk in a nature preserve when he was feeling depressed and closed in from a summer long internship in a science lab.

I stayed at [college] after my freshman year to work in the hydrology laboratory and it was too much on, I needed a break from freshman year, being there, the year was terrific, but staying there the summer too was a little much. And so I was having a bit of a down summer. I decided one day I was going to take a walk, a long walk. I took a quart of water and quart of granola. If I saw someone I would just walk the other way, I walked in the C. Plantations ... I was walking for several hours, stopping and thinking, I just ah, you know, something really aggravating that was coming on.
And I saw a mulberry tree which um....has a lot of meaning in my life a lot of context going back to childhood. It was the first tree I learned when I was going to summer camp, and there was a mulberry tree outside of the school that we went to and hiking to nature camps when I was twelve there were mulberry trees along the way and here in college there's this mulberry tree, and I started picking the mulberries and half way while reaching up and picking them, things shifted for the better, something turned and I saw um ... I later saw some other friends in the plantations and I was able to have a great evening with them. So I have a lot of .. there are trees that I feel identified with, but the mulberry tree is the tree I feel a friendship with, a kinship with, not so much ... though they are red and scraggily, we have commonalities I feel a very strong tie to them and remember, I can remember most of the mulberry trees I have seen in my life. I can remember distinct locations in every place I’ve lived that had mulberry trees. So...

Evan’s story begins with an emotional struggle. He was feeling aggravated from extending his semester work and not having a real break. As I presented in Evan’s description in the previous chapter, Evan seems to draw a sense of meaning from his connection with the outdoor world. “Evan in natural environments” is a crucial piece of his essential perceived being which gives his life meaning. I reasoned that as Evan was spending the majority of his time indoors in a lab, he lost touch with his meaning through being which stems from his connection with the natural world. In this interpretation, when Evan went for a walk in the woods, he was on a hunt to assert his essential meaning that grounded in his being.

In the woods Evan encounters a mulberry tree. I would like to suggest that the mulberry tree became a symbol for Evan of his sense of being that stems from his connection to nature and thus, became a reflection mirror to reestablish his meaning through being. Evan stated that this type of tree holds particular significance for him because of a special feeling of “kinship” he feels with the Mulberry tree. He likened his physical looks to the tree. They are both “red and scraggly.” What really seems to connect the tree as a symbol for his essential being is what transpired in the encounter.
With an almost magical-like quality, when Evan connects with the tree his mood is transformed. I sought to understand more of this transformative encounter, thus I asked a follow up question which I hoped would help Evan dig a little investigate further into the experience.

*Interviewer: Can you go back to that moment when you were in the plantation and you were feeling disconnected, maybe confused*

Evan: mmmmm... yep...

*Interviewer: And you saw the tree, what were you doing with the tree?*

Evan: I saw the tree, it was a wild tree, the plantations has some arboretums, but this is sort of a wild woods next to a gravel parking lot, it was next to a building and I saw that it had fruit on it and so I went to the building and found a small green planting cup , you know with holes, pot, when I walked over, I reached up, the branches were high, they were overhanging a bit, but they were high and so I was reaching up and trying to get as much as I could, to hold up in there, and I don't know what it was exactly, there was a moment when there was, I don't know if it was a reflection back on earlier years or if it was ,but there was a moment that there was a pivotal release or shift. Yep..

The question seemed to help Evan return to the moment when he encountered the mulberry tree. He explained in more detail what he was physically doing that led him to an emotional shift. He seemed unclear as to the cause for what he then called, “a pivotal release.” Evan speculated for a moment that maybe the shift was caused by him reflecting back on early years, though this does not seem to satisfy his reasoning. In my understanding of the narrative it would seem that in that moment Evan experienced a reconnection with his *meaning through being* which freed him from the bounded state he was in, spending too much time disconnected from what gives his life a deeper holistic sense of meaning. I believe that this story also demonstrates the importance of mystery in meaning stories. One might ask why Evan had the meaning revelation experience at this particular moment. Evan does not seem concerned with this question and is satisfied with
not understanding the full relationship between the encounter and the transition that he experienced. In order to get a better understanding of how his reestablishment of meaning through being affected Evan, I asked,

*Interviewer*: And what were you after, what went on for you after that, like the ...

Evan: Things were okay after that. All the tension and frustrations, like things would work out and after that I decided that I would spend the next year abroad, um ... and what I ended up doing is I total revamped my schedule for fall semester, took only classes that I really wanted to take, no requirements, no real requirement, other than things that I was honestly interested in and then in the fall I went abroad.

From Evan’s response it seems that his reestablished meaning through being enabled him to choose more authentically, and intentionally, activities that would give him a sense of meaning through doing.

Thus, to provide a summary of Evan’s narrative through an interpretive lens, I would offer that there is a young man who asserts his raw experience of meaning through connecting with the natural world. One day, when he was an undergraduate, he was feeling closed in and disconnected from spending too much time in a science lab, and so he decided to take a walk in the woods. Unbeknownst to this young man, he went to search for a reconnection with his essential being and thus for his meaning through being. On the way he encountered his being in the form of a mulberry tree. Spending time with an externalized symbol for his being helped him to reestablish his fundamental sense of meaning which allowed him to make more meaningful choices in the long run.

Thus far, I have demonstrated how I encountered being, doing, and integrative statements in the narratives, and how I interpreted those statements as meaning through doing, meaning through being, or integrated (doing and being) meaning. I have showed that a lack on reflecting on meaning through being can impair one’s experience of
meaning. Conversely, I used the stories to show how meaning integration can provide powerful transformation on at least psycho-emotional levels. The subtheme, presented next, will continue to explore the power of meaning integration.

Subtheme: Power labels

When reviewing the narratives that exemplify being- and doing meaning integration I noted that the participants came up with a label for that state of meaning integration that seemed to have great influence over their life direction. I refer to these as power labels because they appear to serve as an empowerment tool for the individual. The power label is a specific quality of identity that manifested in the meaning stories of individuals where I interpreted the presence of an integration of meaning. I decided to create a new term because I wanted to capture the practical benefit of living an integrated meaning-centered life. These power labels seemed to have the following criteria: (1) They seemed to capture the long-term goal or calling of the participant, (2) They were an expression of what the person wanted to do and also who the person wanted to be in the world, and (3) Deciding on the power label was told like a personal revelation that seemed to mark a point of transformation for the participant. Ultimately, it is my perception that gave the labels this power, though they helped me to make sense of the participant’s world of meaning.

Evan’s power label seems to be a “Teacher,” or “Ecologist.” In the following excerpt from Evan’s interview he described how the label of ecologist demonstrates what he wants to be engaged in and who he wants to be seen as in the world.

They help people both stay true to themselves, or true themselves and help them move on their way, and so currently I want to be a teacher. An ecologist helps people find wonder in the natural world and sends them off to go on their
own path from there, so my ideal goal, profession for that would be an ecologist at a university where I teach people which are eager and ready to learn.

Evan’s *power label* seems to be intimately tied with a work path. The *power label*, though, does not need to be specifically tied to a career. For example Louis seems to find meaning in the label of an “Anomaly.”

Louis described himself in his early twenties as, “I was out as gay, I was out as Jewish, I was this sort of anomaly, it was sort of fun actually …” This idea of being an “Anomaly” meant that Louis saw himself as a social outcast – as an individual who does not easily fit in to normal social categories. Taking on this label gave Louis a sense of meaning as it steered him to his vocational path as a therapist and to a religious path of conversion. Louis found profound personal meaning in accepting himself as an outcast that can be loved and as a person who can love other outcasts.

I’ve never lost a sense of purpose and meaning and direction in my life, that comes through a relationship with God, and also comes through a sense that as long as I’m doing something worthwhile for other people, and it took me a while to accept and for me too, but at least for other people, then there’s something worthwhile going on in my life. There’s something that’s, that’s about my worth … there’s meaning and purpose in my life. And that has held with me to this day.

Because of his personal relationship with God, Louis appears to have a solid foundation of affirmation. His conception of himself as an “Anomaly” seemed to give him a sense of belonging and purpose and thus was a positive label for him. A participant’s *power labels* might have changed over the course of the interview. It is possible to summarize a person’s life narrative by stringing together a chain of their *power labels*. For example, Bella’s chain of *power labels* might be “Misfit,” “Mother,” “Hippie,” “Teacher,” and “Counselor.”

In her adolescent years Bella described herself as a “Misfit.” She shared,
Socially, I was definitely a misfit. Academically, I could have cared less. The walls shook in the apartment with all the fighting that was going on. My relationship with my mother, which was never especially easy, became really very, very tense, and my relationship with my father shifted in that I looked more to him in a more overt way for parenting because I just wasn’t getting along with my mother.

As a young adult she embodied the label of “Mother.”

Interviewer: So before we move on, what is it about being a mother that’s significant to you?

Bella: Everything. It is probably the most core experience that a person can have, I think, being a parent. It is a commitment that one makes, and it doesn’t end until you drop dead. It goes on forever. It doesn’t matter if your children are adults, which mine are now. I suppose, looking back on this now, it defined me as a person in a way that I wanted to be defined. I always did want to have children, and it defined me, I was a mother, I believed I was good at it, I enjoyed it, and it provided an opportunity for emotional intimacy with two people in a way that I probably had not experienced—well, except with my own parents and brother. It was … this was my family. I became responsible in a way I never had to before, and I had to organize my life around other people in a way I didn’t need to before. And I would say that becoming a mother was probably the first time in my life that I felt that I was well-defined, and that my life had real meaning.

Later on in Bella’s story she embraced the power label of “Hippie.”

… and we were passing the sewing store so I was looking in the window, and the sun was shining in it so that it became a mirror. And I saw this really cool hippie woman holding a daughter in each hand, and realized it was me. And I was just stunned, because I couldn’t have become that by—it just happened naturally. My hair grew long, I wasn’t wearing makeup, my clothes were what they were, and here I was, looking like I had—but it was more than that. What I realized was that, that was who I had really become, that the values that were essential for me, what was important to me was important to me because I had come to realize—I became a reflective person, I became a spiritual person.

As Bella begins her career life, she moves through the labels of “Teacher,” and “Counselor.” She shared,

Coming on to, I was 37 when I took that job, and a few significant things happened besides the real excitement and joy that I felt for the first time working at a job that I wanted to work at, doing something that I believed in, my kids were both in school all day by then, so I could do it, and I was on their calendar, and I
really loved doing the social work aspect of what any Headstart teacher has to be doing.

and,

... School guidance counselor. It’s a wonderful place, I love the people I work with, I love the families I work with ... Incredible. And it’s a place that I feel very proud to work. And it won’t be the last job I have, because I have to work ‘til I drop because of my life choices [laughter], but it’s only the second place where I’ve worked where I have just thought, “Oh, this is so wonderful.” It’s like what Headstart was for me. Headstart launched me. This is kind of solidifying things.

Identifying the power labels in Bella’s narrative enabled me to create a road map of meaning for her life. The meaning that is represented by the labels is an integration of meaning through being and doing, and in creating and discovering meaning. They seemed to give Bella a sense of coherence throughout her life, which is in itself a major factor in the experience of meaning (Antonovsky, 1979).

Conclusion of Meaning through Being, Doing, and Integration Theme

In chapter 2, I explored the concept of being in the individual’s psyche. Cottingham (1996) was introduced as stating that being is the seat of primordial awareness which allows the individual to interact with the world. This interaction is the process of knowing. As I have shown from the narratives reviewed above, in the stories of individuals, their meaningful actions and self-identifying traits reflect their meaningful sense of being. Individuals have some sense of who they are and this sense leads them towards making meaningful choices. Meaning integration can be seen when an action creates meaning in one’s life (meaning through doing) because the choice of action was made by a being that is expressed through meaning (meaning through being).
The above understanding of meaning integration supports the philosophy of Sartre (1956) who wrote that being precedes one’s essence and can only be known through its meaning.

An existent cannot be stripped of its being; being is the ever present foundation of existent; it is everywhere in it and nowhere. There is not being which is not the being of a certain mode of being, none which can be apprehended through the mode of being which manifests and veils it as the same time. Consciousness can always pass beyond the existent, not toward its being, but toward the meaning of this being. (p. 25)

In personal meaning, well-adjusted individuals are aware that they operate within a sense of I AM-ness (existence) which allows them to believe that they matter and that they have a sense of purpose. Therefore, a primordial sense of awareness through one’s being is the foreground for a primordial sense of meaning. Simply put, the above discussion proves the philosophical point that the human experience begins with being. Frankl (1962) received criticism for talking about a primordial and ever-present sense of meaning because it has religious and spiritual connotations. The above exploration of the concept of meaning through being shows that when contextualized in the language of being, meaning that is ever-present does not have to stem from a Higher Power nor threaten secular-based meaning theories, such as those of Yalom (1980) and Baumeister (1998). Psychology can easily embrace a meaning with a capital M, when it is a meaning that stems from the essential being of each individual.

Frankl (1962) coined the phrase “will to meaning,” and there have been numerous attempts to measure the concept without perhaps fully understanding what it means. The failure to clearly capture the meaning of Frankl’s phrase was a major criticism of the meaning measurement scales mentioned in chapter 2 (Zeitchik, 2001). My analysis of meaning through being seems to add understanding to Frankl’s nebulous phrase. In light
of our narrative study, “will to meaning” can be seen as an innate sense of *I AM*-ness, or being-ness which spawns the belief that, *I matter and I have a sense of purpose*. Thus, the “will to meaning” precedes the search for meaning, as the search for meaning is the insatiable drive to affirm the “will to meaning.” When it comes to personal meaning, there is no need to separate out bio-social, pursuit of meaning, terms (Emmons, 2003) from psycho-spiritual, meaning connected to being, terminology (May, 1989; Tillich, 1990). For my purpose a bio-psycho-social-spiritual understanding is that personal meaning is a core experience which is rooted in and affects all levels of the human being. While a major part of that understanding is the need for goal directed behavior (*meaning through doing*), my results illuminate an equally necessary piece of the core, *meaning through being*. *Meaning through being* asserts the process of continued and deeper self-awareness in personal meaning. Additionally it stresses the ever-present right and access to a raw experience of meaning based on nothing more than the fact that an individual exists. The next crucial piece I will explore is how the awareness of *meaning through being* impacted the participants.

**Implications of Meaning Integration**

The preceding exploration of *meaning through being* has practical implications for how exploring *meaning through being* might impact an individual. This section opens the conversation for ramifications for counseling as clients often come to therapy to rescue their ability to make meaning after traumatic experiences (Brown, 2008). A counselor who can help a client to reconnect with one’s established sense of *meaning through being* can potentially help that client become more skillful in creating meaningful experience through doing. To demonstrate this point further, I will present
two narratives from the participant interviews which included follow up questions that seemed to make space for the participants to explore their sense of meaning through being more thoroughly. The assumption that I am working with in this section is that there was a similar therapeutic process that occurred when I was probing for meaning through being, similar to that of the counselor-client relationship. The valence of the narratives differs because one demonstrates a positive sense of meaning through being, and the second demonstrates a negative sense of meaning through being.

During the interviews, I noticed that participants might reflect on meaning through doing and I wondered to myself, where is their sense of meaning through being? As the interviews progressed it became more natural for me to ask a follow-up question that would allow the meaning through being to surface in the narratives. The following exchange occurred in Thina’s interview. She had just relayed a meaningful story about witnessing and reacting to a friend’s near fatal accident. The “being statements” are bolded for emphasis.

*Interviewer: So when you began this story you said there are some things that you found out about yourself, so what did you find out about yourself?*

*Thina: Yeah, so in that situation, I think I learned that in a really intense, difficult, emotional situation, I can...um ... I can be strong. But it also could have been, like people fit roles in situations, so if Molly had been strong, and she had been the one to be where I was, maybe I would have been the hysterical one. But in that case there was a role that I felt needed to be filled, I think that’s what it is. And I was able to fill this role even though it was a really intense, horrible situation.*

When Thina made the statement, “I can be strong,” she expressed something about her essential being that she valued about herself. As Baumeister (1998) pointed out a sense of value stems from a sense of meaning. When Thina acknowledged her self-worth, and thus exposed her meaning through being, I decided to ask another follow-up question in order to hear more about her raw experience of meaning.
Interviewer: And what does it do for you to see yourself in that role, to know that you can play that role if needed?

Thina: I like knowing that I can be dependable. You know, knowing that I’m not going to lose it, and that I can operate well under a certain kind of pressure is a relief, and it gives me confidence in myself and it gives me the ability to trust myself more and to understand how I can honestly say that in this kind of situation, this is how I would react, rather than saying this is how I’d like to react.

Thina expanded her meaning through being from valuing her strength (“I can be strong”). I am arguing that these qualities of being that she emphasized upon reflection of her actions are Thina’s access point to her raw experience of meaning. Seeing herself as dependable, confident, and trustworthy gives her a sense of internal meaning that cannot be erased because it is connected to who she is. The point is not that Thina was able to speak about her self as dependable, confident, and trustworthy; rather in sharing about herself she acknowledges her existence in a way that she discovers personal meaning. It is hard to convey in mere words the feeling behind a statement, though for Thina, this statement seemed like a deep personal acknowledgment. I am struck by a metaphor of someone peering into a dark cave. Suddenly there is a flash of light, and for a moment the person can see with relief that all they could hope for is in the cave.

Later in her interview Thina stated that she was currently struggling with finding a meaning in her career choice. If I were working with Thina as a client, I might follow-up our exploration of her meaning through being by asking her how she can further create experiences in her life where she feels dependable, confident and trustworthy. My rationale would be to promote the innate experience of meaning within Thina by encouraging action that reflected this basic sense of meaning.

Another practical implication that I interpreted from the narrative analysis was the effect of negative meaning through being on a participant. Not all participants shared
positive statements about their being. A negative “being statement” can point to a negative sense of meaning through being. Edward, in a childhood narrative, expressed his raw experience of meaning through being as someone who is hated and condemned. Again, statements that connote being are italicized from clarity.

They sent me to— It was a Catholic—well, it was a bilingual school, and then to finish third grade, because I ended in the middle of third grade, they sent me to—well, to finish Chapter 3, I finished third grade in a Protestant school which was horrible. Other kids hated me, and the religion teacher told me that she knew that I was gonna go to hell.

The messages that Edward received about himself in those ripe years were of rejection and condemnation. As the listener I wondered how these attacks on Edward’s being had affected him. When asked to reflect further, Edward’s negative perception of self caused him to continue to glean negative meaning through being from his story.

Interviewer: So how did that impact you? 
Edward: Negatively. I was like, what the hell?! Who does she think she is? I was angry about it, ’cause you don’t do that. I hated all the kids in that school, they were all a bunch of pricks, like literally, they were. They were hating upon me, they despised me for no apparent reason. I didn’t do anything. Just because I was the new kid, I guess. And my family was making ends meet to take me to that school, which was a horrible expensive school, for no reason. So that’s pretty much it for that chapter.

My question pushed Edward further into the negative meaning of the situation. He reiterated the statement, “kids hated me,” though in the second telling it became, “They were hating upon me, they despised me...” Edward appears to be defending his being from engulfing this hatefulness that is coming from the outside in. There still is a separation between the hatred and himself in the way he phrases his statements; he does not say I am hated. Unfortunately as Edward continued his narrative it became clear that this hatred and dismissal of self had penetrated into Edward’s being and it shapes the way he views his relationship with the world around him.
I feel like the world is being a pain in the ass right now, because C. and I are trying to save money, so that we can afford some things that for us would be luxuries, and for regular people are normal things.

The above quotation demonstrates that Edward is still at odds with the world. He sees the world as getting in the way of his ability to live a “normal” life. As a counselor it is helpful to stay aware of how our clients internalize negativity into their perception of their own being, and how that negativity will seep into their meaning through being. If I was working with Edward I might try to work with him to uproot the negative associations with his being. The entry point to that work is to help him become aware of how his way of experiencing meaning in the world is connected with the way he affirms his being in the world. A healthier model of transforming negative meaning through being can be seen from Lee’s story.

When Lee shared a statement of negative meaning through being he began to reflect on how he has dealt with a challenge. In general he transformed the perceived curse into a blessing. I will use the following excerpt to demonstrate this point. Lee shared this story about dealing with a learning disorder in a mainstream classroom.

Yeah, I think being in a room in 4th grade, and being asked by teachers to read aloud in class, and not being able to. And her making me read out loud in class, and being humiliated. My teacher, Mrs. P., she wasn’t very nice, and she had two books, one for the lower readers, and one for the upper readers, and if you couldn’t read either book, then it didn’t matter, you had to read one of them. And I couldn’t read at all, maybe a little bit, a few words here and there, but she basically made me read out loud in class, and everyone would laugh. [Laughter] It was bad.

Lee’s difficulty with reading and the perceived insensitivity of Mrs. P. forced a negative association with his being, I am “being humiliated.” As with Edward, I wondered how the sense of humiliation had affected Lee in that moment, and also moving into who Lee is today. I asked,
Interviewer: How has that stayed with you?

Lee: I think it made me want to work harder, and really made me have a lot of compassion in my life, and have a fierce sense of determination, a fierce sense of injustice. Of righting injustice and working towards a world that's better, everyone has a chance to live with dignity, and self-worth … And again, along with my father’s story, it instilled a sense of, ‘Things need to be changed,’ and it’s not fair that I’m treated differently.

Lee began his story relating a sense of self that is humiliated. Further reflection helped him to separate out the experience that was placed upon him and who he is as a person.

By creating this boundary Lee was able to assert a meaning through being that is determined, compassionate, and has a, “fierce sense of injustice.” Lee discovered a positive sense of meaning through being by reflecting on a painful experience from his past. His story can serve as a model for an individual whose being was attacked by negativity of the past. Lee has grown into a confident Transgender man who emphasizes his being through using his story as inspiration to work for social change.

Chapter V Conclusion

I began this chapter’s conclusion with a restatement of its research question in order to map what was learned thus far. The first research question reads, What are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists (meaning through being)? The above discussion expanded the parameters of this question. I demonstrated the raw experience of meaning that can be found and is present in the stories that people tell about meaning. The concept of meaning through being was discussed as the raw experience of meaning that was seen in the stories. Through the concept of a unique meaning through being the presence of a universal being emerged as an ever-present core for each individual.
Narrative excerpts showed the importance for individuals to explore both meaning through being and meaning through doing in their life narratives. Noted also was an example of a participant who explored negative meaning through being which caused him to delve further into despair and anger. The possible reasons for this consequence will be explored in the next chapter as I look at the distinction between creation of meaning and discovery of meaning. Mostly though, the participants gained greater self-awareness and insight by exploring their meaning through being. I introduced a concept called, power labels as an identity label that is charged with meaning integration. Relevant to our study is that they were able to affirm their beings in a positive way, which in turn allowed them to harness clarity of direction from their personal meaning revelations. It is to the concept of meaning affirmation that I now turn in the next chapter as answers to the second research question is explored.
CHAPTER VI

Assertion of Meaning in Personal Conflicts with Cultural

*Defining and Refining the Second Research Question*

In this chapter I will address the second research question. The original question read as follows:

*How might meaning-making and meaning-seeking play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?*

The terms “meaning-making” and “meaning-seeking” were used by Wong (2008) and were introduced in the literature review in chapter 2. Wong employed these terms in order to distinguish between meaning that is actively created through a process of social construction (meaning-making) and meaning that is innately registered in order to make sense out of the chaotic world (meaning-seeking). Meaning-making then would involve defining something (internally or externally) as meaningful, while meaning-seeking would be establishing a *sense of coherence* in one’s life (Antonovsky 1979).

As the interpretation of the narratives progressed I decided upon a more fitting distinction for what I saw happening in the meaning narratives. I preferred the phrases of *creation of meaning* and *discovery of meaning* as they seemed to be more in line with the experience of the participants. The terms *discover* and *creation* are connected with the writings of Frankl (1962) and May (1989) whose ideas of being-based meaning are the focus of this dissertation.

In the narratives there was one process, *creation of meaning*, which was an active and purposeful manipulation of one’s environment to sustain a sense of meaning. The other process, *discovery of meaning*, was more of a reflexive process whereby the
meaning would be revealed to the narrator in an unexpected way. I use the word reflexive here because it suggests that experientially, meaning happens to the individual. Therefore, the original question, restated with more appropriate reference to the stories told, is,

*How might creation of meaning and discovery of meaning play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?*

This question will build on the first research that was discussed above because the concepts of meaning through being and meaning integration are central to the ways in which meaning is discovered and created. Two major themes will be discussed in order to answer this question. The first theme, Discovery of meaning leads to creation of meaning, will look at the discovery/creation dichotomy and I will argue for a temporal relationship between the two processes as evidenced by the narratives told. I will apply the learning that is gained from this theme to the Park & Folkman (1997) model of Global and Situational meaning and conclude that “searching for meaning” is not a term that accurately captures the human experience. Instead, are suggested as umbrella terms for how people relate to their personal meaning schemas. I borrowed this language from May (1983) who wrote that we have an innate drive to assert our existence in each moment. For May, assertion of existence is what we refer to as meaning. *Assertion of-, affirmation of-, or confirmation of meaning* honors meaning through being as a real, ever-present concept which emphasizes the relationship to the I-AM experience of every individual. This way of languaging the personal meaning experience ensures that the more subtle forms of meaning of Frankl (1962) and May (1989), as presented in chapter 2, are not lost in the more recent emphasis on meaning through doing.
The second theme, *Willful versus willing approach to creating meaning*, specifically focuses on the process of *creation of meaning* and illuminates a variety of ways in which an individual can approach creating meaning. The theme is housed in the writings of Gerald May (1982) who connects the way an individual approaches life with their ability to assert personal meaning. I will also discuss the ramifications of cultural conflicts to meaning assertion. Ego development will be suggested as a reason for discrepancy in ability to cope with cultural barriers to meaning.

A Word about Social Construction and Meaning

If we look through the eyes of the social constructivist paradigm (Arceiero & Guidano, 2000) in reference to meaning, there can be only one underlying process that is occurring. As an individual interacts with his or her environment they mutually construct the way in which they understand the world. Their world perception includes the meaning that they use to make sense of the world – meaning-seeking (according to Wong, 2008), and it includes the meaning that they ascribe to objects and themselves in the world – meaning-making (according to Wong). This presents a challenge if I want to make distinctions in the meaning construction process.

In order to make such distinctions, I assert that in the experience of the individuals interviewed for this study there was a difference in the way the meaning stories were told. It might be that underneath all the stories the foundational process occurring was construction of meaning, but people do not articulate their experience of life solely as such. Therefore, it is important to explore the ways in which people experience their lives as unfolding. Another issue that will become clear throughout this chapter is that construction of meaning does not consider the *being* experience which is a
prerequisite for constructing meaning. For this reason, I will argue that the term assertion, affirmation, or, confirmation of meaning more directly captures the core meaning experience of individuals. In order to limit confusion with multiple terms, I will employ the use of assertion to denote the more appropriate term to speak about the personal meaning process in the human experience.

Theme 2: Meaning Through Discovery Leading to Creation of Meaning

When looking at the narratives across participants, I noticed two distinct meaning processes that occur, which I refer to as discovery of meaning and creation of meaning. This theme explores the distinction between the two and suggests a sequence to these experientially different processes. Discovery of meaning involves a significant encounter with the world. Participants told discovery of meaning stories that involved the profound experience of a mystical encounter, or simply an encounter of looking at one’s self in the mirror. The following story told by Thomas captures the nature of a meaning story that involves discovery of meaning. The narrative is about a Jewish-German witnessing trip to Auschwitz in which Thomas participated. Given that he is neither Jewish nor German, Thomas began the experience feeling like an outsider. His story is about how he transitioned into feeling like a full member of the group.

That’s when I first really started to feel like I was a part of this experience, and I started to take more responsibility for myself as a part of this experience. And then, the moment I’m talking about is at Auschwitz, at the Stammlager, which is the first camp, I think the prison camp.

There was a wall of pictures of women, all women, and they’ve just been taken off of the trains, and the whole process, given new clothes, and each woman is standing up against this blank wall, and the Nazi guards are photographing them. And I must have looked at this wall of pictures for maybe an hour and a half, looking at each person and really trying to feel a connection with them, and to get into the world of what they had experienced and gone through, what they were about to experience and go through. And I remember being devastated by them and seeing their names and not being able to let go of their names, and
feeling like I had to write them down, especially the ones I felt most connected to. So I remember just writing them down, and I walked to an anteroom, and I started weeping, like I had never wept before, and I remember, I think it was one of the German participants, S., and then one of the Jewish participants, P., just held me, and it was raining outside and there was this really bizarre Catholic processions in the streets that disturbed me. At the time it really bothered me. It seemed like this group was trying to take over the suffering of what had happened there, I don’t know.

That, all these things came together and I just remember breaking down at that point, and my involvement in the group changed entirely, where I felt like, though I didn’t have a historical, family connection to the Holocaust as the German and the Jewish participants did, I had a human connection, and I could offer my own subjective self and experience, which included that horrible relationship that went on before then-- it turned out that was meaningful, and then I had another one of those immediate thoughts where I needed to, my taking responsibility, it felt like that, in that moment, looking at those pictures meant that my life had to have a religious meaning, and it was a very clear thought. And so that was a turning point, things changed entirely after that...

In Thomas’ story he shifts from the perspective of a stranger to someone who belongs to the experience. A fundamental aspect of that change is Thomas discovering a meaningful connection to the group and to the Holocaust that he had not been aware of before he encountered the ‘wall of women’ photographs. By grasping that Thomas belonged to the experience he woke up to the a priori being experience that is affirmed through his sense of belongingness: his meaning through being. The understanding of belongingness that is sensed through his humanity came forward. For Thomas this awakening becomes connected to a new desire to be engaged in, “religious meaning,” and it alters the course of his life path after college which brings him to explore the priesthood.

Thomas alluded that belongingness is essential to his personal meaning in an earlier tale that he told about his family.

My dad with his alcoholism, his moods, his temper. My mom, who was incredibly protective of us, but also a lawyer who worked 60 hours a week, wasn’t always at home. So there was always stress. But when we went on the trip,
except for when we left and when we returned, all the time in between, there was just a lot of happiness and play. And one of the ... I just remember, one thing I loved more than anything else, was when me, my twin sister, my older sister, and my dad, sometimes my mom, would go out to the ocean and just float around on rafts, and he would sing strange songs.

The experience of Thomas’ father as both intimate and distant has set the stage for a core struggle for a sense of belongingness. As Thomas related this story as a meaning narrative, I deduce that his need for belongingness has become an essential element to his experience of personal meaning. In Auschwitz, Thomas discovered his sense of belongingness as a meaningful way by which he asserts his awareness of being.

It is important to emphasize the connection between discovery of meaning and meaning through being. Meaning through being is the characterological-based meaning which allows a person to tap into their I-AM, or being experience. Discovery of meaning similarly involves a being connection as it asserts for the individual what is meaningful as beings in the world. As can be seen in Thomas’ story about discovering meaning, in his sense of belonging, he discovered meaning through being in finding his place in the experience. It exposed a core way he asserts his being in the world – through belongingness. Thus, I conclude that discovery of meaning occurs when an encounter with the world teaches an individual what is meaningful to them and about them.

Another point about discovery of meaning is that the protagonist of the story does not have to necessarily understand all the events of the experience that transpired. In fact, in many stories there was a presence of mystery, and allowing that mystery to be was sufficient for the narrators to glean meaning from the stories. The following are excerpts from different participant interviews in which there is an element of uncertainty in the meaning that they discovered from the connected narratives. I only present the piece
where they share about the *discovery of meaning* because they are sufficient to illuminate the point. I have italicized the element of mystery for clarity.

“I was relieved and thankful that *God had taken me into the unknown.*” (Kate)

“And what is the meaning of that? In *some ways for whatever reason*, I got all the lucky breaks that they didn’t. Granted, I worked very hard, but so many people work hard. So many people work hard their whole lives. And if I had challenges I’d rise to them, but *things just come to me right now.* And I’m very fortunate, but there’s guilt and confusion I feel about that, knowing how hard my parents worked.” (Aria)

“And through really, really positive encouragement—because normally, I get really mad, or yell at people, or something, but for some reason in this position, I was like, all right, I can make this work to my advantage, and we can not embarrass ourselves. And we won the tournament …” (Thina)

The three excerpts show that in the process of *discovery of meaning* an individual does not have to always be aware of the entire sequence of events that has taken place, nor do they have to understand why something happens the way it did. For Kate, Aria, and Thina there is meaning in the fact that sometimes things “just happen,” and that people do not have to always be *in the know.* This point about mystery has ramifications for the theoretical understanding of the sense of coherence construct introduced by Antonovsky (1979).

*Sense of Coherence Revisited*

In the literature review above (chapter 2), the meaning-based construct, sense of coherence (SOC) was introduced as a quantitative construct that measures the perception that one’s life has an order and sequence. The construct of SOC teaches us that in order for people to have a sense of meaning they have to understand how the events of their life fit together. The subtheme discussed in the previous chapter, *Power Labels*, seems to fit in well with the SOC concept. The presence of a *power label* made the underlying
statement, “I know where I came from and I know where I'm going.” The concept of SOC is challenged though with the introduction of mystery.

For several participants not understanding why an event took place provided the meaning for the circumstance. Evan found meaning in an encounter with a willow tree that lifted his mood, though he could not articulate why the internal mood shift had taken place. Kate stated numerous times how thankful she was to be taken into the unknown. Her personal meaning, in part, stems from learning how to surrender to mystery. As I will present in theme 3, the self-surrender (or willingness) approach to life is thought to provide a more comprehensive assertion to meaning (May, 1982). The current study suggests a caveat for the SOC construct. At times not knowing can provide a sense of meaning and trying to understand the sequence of everything may create more turmoil than stability.

**Personal Values and the Discovery of Meaning**

A final aspect of discovery of meaning is that upon reflection from the stories, the participants would draw meaning in the form of personal values that have shaped their future experiences. Their encounters in their stories served as a reminder to the values that they find meaningful (or use to create meaning with) and strive to live by. Bella shared,

“So then the kids were getting older. W. needed braces on her teeth, and they cared about—W. cared a lot about style. She didn’t want homemade clothing, and she didn’t want clothing from the Goodwill anymore … And I thought, I don’t want to do to my kids what my parents, unwittingly, did to us, which was to insist that their values be our values, that we become who they were. And if W. wanted jeans with embroidery on the back pockets from the department store, and she did need braces on her teeth, then I had to earn the money. And it was interesting, because I got a lot of pushback from people, saying “How can you sell out this way?” Not so much about the teeth, but the jeans. “Why are you doing this?” And I said, because I want to let them grow up
to be who they want to be. It’s my job to encourage whatever they want to try, so that they can figure out who they want to be, and this is important.”

This story marks a transition in Bella’s life narrative. Before this story Bella had told how she dropped out of conventional life and was living in a minimalist environment with her daughters. As she faced her older daughter’s desire for greater materiality she revealed a central value for herself as a mother. She realized that it was important for her to empower her daughters to find their own paths in life (agency) and that they did not have to live the life of a “hippie,” as Bella created. This realization of a nuclear value led Bella to her, “reentry,” into the world. After regaining her financial independence Bella decided to pursue a career as a family early interventionist and a school counselor, which she has continued to work at for over thirty years. Discovery of meaning in narratives is about noticing something meaningful that was always there. Thus, this value of personal agency was always a part of Bella’s personal meaning framework, though in the context of the story she re-engages with that core value which influenced how she saw herself in the world. She saw renewed personal meaning in supporting her daughters’ agency. Discovery of meaning can be seen as having three elements: (1) unplanned or unexpected, (2) an aspect of mystery, and, (3) points to a value which the individual strives to live by. Creation of Meaning

In contrast to discovery of meaning, creation of meaning was more commonly present in the participants’ stories. Creation of meaning was noted when an individual shared about an intentional act that they actively engaged in, which they assumed would bring a greater sense of meaning into their lives. In general, creation of meaning seems to be connected with an externalized focus and a “sense of possession.” By “sense of possession” I mean that the participants spoke about the engagement as them acting upon
the world and that they have complete ownership of the accomplishment. For example, Daryl shared, “And my twin brother and I were the only ones in my family to graduate from high school. And I’m the only one in my immediate family to graduate from college,” and Bella related, “I’m very glad that I learned trope [melodic emphasis in scriptural recitation] because—I didn’t this year, but for all the other years since my Bat Mitzvah, I leyned [read scripture with melody] four or five times a year, and I leyned at High Holy Day services, on Rosh Hashanah.”

These short stories suffice as examples for creation of meaning. Daryl and Bella tell their stories as their actions directly led to the accomplishment of their goals. For Daryl, getting educated, and for Bella, leyning Torah, are actions that assert their meaning. There is no mystery of how Daryl came to graduate from High School, or how Bella learn the melody to learn scripture. Their achievements filled them with a sense of meaning through doing. To reference the subsection, What counts as a meaningful story? (See chapter 4.), all the stories that were told were seen as meaning stories since they were told with the instruction of sharing a narrative that was particularly meaningful in each life chapter. Thus, Daryl’s and Bella’s stories about achievement are about the meaning that they created through their acts of study.

The above examples also demonstrate how creation of meaning is ultimately a chosen being-based assertion of meaning. By Daryl setting an intention to complete High School he is confirming his experience of himself as a being in the world. This affirmation of being served as a foundation for the meaning he experienced when he accomplished his goal. In the next section I will look at the relationship between
**discovery of meaning** and **creation of meaning**. The experience of being as foundational for both processes will be further evidenced.

**The Discovery to Creation of Meaning Flow**

It appears that before a participant can create meaning, they have to discover what is meaningful for them first. This simple statement actually suggests something quite profound about the potential for how individuals engage with life. In order for a person to establish a sense of **meaning through doing** by creating meaning, they have to be open to experiences in which the world will surprise them and they can encounter their authentic sense of **I-AM**. In a way they have to relinquish a sense of control and order to discover sustained meaning. This supports Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi’s (2008) view of eudaimonic happiness, discussed in chapter 2, in which meaning has to be present before an action can be called meaningful.

The proposed model of this study (See Figure) suggests that there is an ongoing process as created experiences can in turn shed new light about the self or world, resulting in a new discovery. In fact, participants seemed to become aware of new sources of meaning by reflecting on a past experience, thus discovery can take place at any age. The remainder of this chapter will set out to support these assertions.

Daryl’s excerpt above can be used as an example to show the **discovery** to **creation of meaning** flow. Daryl created meaning when he completed High School, though in connection with that story he shared about how he discovered the meaning for him in education.

And I knew that personally, for me to get out of the situation I was in, in the South Side of Chicago, gangs, drugs, that education was the way to do that. So I kind of focused on that. But it was also a very lonely, isolated time for me. Just incredibly shy, to the point where I couldn’t really function outside of a
school setting, because I didn’t have the social skills other kids had in the neighborhood. I just didn’t develop those skills, because I just didn’t interact with other kids to develop those skills. So I just struggled a lot.

Daryl described two meaningful discoveries as a result of his encounter with the toxic environment of this youth and his schooling. He learned that there was meaning for him in studying hard because it would be his ticket away from a dangerous environment. He also discovered that the school environment was the rare place where his being shined. With an access point to an I-AM experience and an understanding of the value of education in place, Daryl was able to engage in the creation of meaning by completing high school. It is important to highlight the discovery of meaning process that is prior to the creation of meaning process because the discovery process tells the reader, or whoever encounters Daryl (including encountering himself), something fundamental about who Daryl is. I see it as having a “Daryl experience” when I am privy to the central process of discovery of meaning, rather than simply hear a story about Daryl’s success. This is similar to the I-THOU relationship that Buber (1958) wrote about, where a deeper connection and appreciation is manifested between two beings.

Throughout the stories told there were multiple instances of the participants reflecting on a past experience where they learned something about themselves. These discoveries about themselves were framed in the perception of what was important to them, what they valued about themselves or the world, or something that they had discovered about themselves or the world that would shape their future meaning pursuits. This point is exemplified in another story from Daryl’s interview. It was the first narrative he told about his early years growing up in the South Side of Chicago.

Daryl: There’s this one story—we were living in the South Side of Chicago, and we were in the process of moving. And it’s a really weird story, but I still
remember it. My mom coming home from the grocery store, and she sends me into the kitchen, and I must have been about four. I remember seeing this rat running across the floor, and I went running and screaming to my mom. She said, “Oh, it’s OK, we’re gonna be moving soon, so don’t worry about it.” So that was very comforting to me.

And to this day I still remember that, and putting that into context with the 60’s and 50’s and the living conditions a lot of African-Americans were forced to live in. And respecting my parents for doing the best they could, and not being judgmental toward my parents for that, but respecting them for doing the best that they could, if that makes sense.

*Interviewer: And how does that impact your approach to life today?*

*Daryl:* I’m not quite sure how that story ties into my life today, but I guess the sense of comfort of my mom telling me that everything’s gonna be OK, I guess I carry that with me, and knowing and believing that it truly is gonna be OK.

This story is an early memory for Daryl that he told as a meaningful narrative from his first chapter of life. At first, it would seem that he told the story because it simply stood out in his memory. (“I’m not quite sure how that story ties into my life today.”) Upon reflection, he discovered that the story, though it occurred many years ago, carried a meaningful message for him in the present. (“I guess I carry that with me, and knowing and believing that it truly is gonna be OK.”) His mother instilled within him a sense of peace that things will work out. It would stand to reason that this message would have continued significance in his life, as Daryl faced divorce, coming out as gay, and more recently, dealing with his father’s passing. Another way in which he discovered personal meaning in the story was by connecting his narrative to the larger context narrative of African-American people living in the USA in the 50’s and 60’s. Seeing his life as part of a larger tribal, or cultural, narrative, probably helped Daryl to understand the sequence of his life and the significance of his accomplishments. In the above section I have demonstrated that in order for an individual to create meaning in their life, they must have first had an experience of *discovery of meaning*. I have also shown that
discovery of meaning is not limited to the time when the event takes place; rather meaning is available to be discovered anytime upon reflection of a meaningful experience.

This following section will introduce one of the major messages of this dissertation – the connection between meaning and social justice. If I assume that everyone has the right to meaning, then I make a commitment to live in a world where that is possible. As I shall explore in this next section, not everyone perceives themselves as being able to create meaning in our society. As a result, either the person’s perception and/or our society must be altered.

**Barred Access to Meaning: An Issue of Social Justice**

Edward seems to be stuck in that he has discovered that working in nature is meaningful to him, though he expressed that he is trapped by the practicality of life which hinders his creation of meaningful experiences that involve the natural world. He has discovered that engaging in nature will create for him an experience of being connection:

My grandmother lived in a very rural place, my uncles and aunts were already older, so they were always doing their own thing, and I was always the one kid around. I went exploring through the woods a lot.

And,

In the non-school life, my mom and I moved three different times during that period. Three or four, and it was always to different neighborhoods, so I was always the new kid in the neighborhood. Then we lived in this one neighborhood, where I was able to go outside for a bit, but after that things got really bad in it, and I couldn’t go out for the last three years living there, so that was kinda crappy.

Upon reflecting why he chose wildlife management as his major in college,

Edward declared:
Well, I remember always wanting to be outdoors, and liking the outdoors, I didn’t want to be in an office for the rest of my life. There are still things … like right now I’m a high school teacher, and I enjoy it. But I think I want to actually end up doing something in wildlife again for the rest of my life, that’s what I want to do.

It is clear from the above statements that Edward has a passion that stems from his childhood. Also clear is that Edward does not think he will find fulfillment in his current situation.

One of these days, hopefully, for C. and the kids and I, we can get a bigger house, and maybe somewhere either more in the woods, more in the mountains, or maybe closer to the ocean.

Edward was more concerned with making ends meet and expressed that “the world,” is getting in the way of him living a happy and meaningful life.

I feel like the world is being a pain in the ass right now … Like, we would like to get, like simple things, like we would like to be debt free. But it seems like every time we’re close to getting to that, like the truck broke, and we had to put a thousand, five hundred bucks on it, and blah … I try to save as much money, but it just—it feels like money is like. They say money doesn’t buy anybody happiness, but I’m saying that whoever has it at least has more of an ease of not having to struggle to be able to afford his medication, or to get better health insurance, to send their kids to better schools, to not have a car that breaks down every two seconds, so I think that right now that’s the biggest worry. To be financially stable. So I feel like the world tries to prevent that a lot.

It is a sobering dilemma when society and culture appear to get in the way of a person’s right to create a meaningful life based on what they have discovered as meaningful from one’s relationship with the world. This becomes an issue of social justice because we live in a system where the innate right to meaning is blocked by our own cultural rules. Edward’s obstacle to a fulfilled life seems to be that he borders between lower- and middle-economic classes. I find it important to emphasize that individuals can always seem to experience a discovery of meaning. The issue of social justice arises when that individual cannot figure out how to use the meaning that they
have discovered from their encounter with world in order to create further meaningful experiences.

Lee, being transgendered, seems to be dealing with a more fundamental barricade to experiencing life as meaningful.

“I think for me it’s very difficult in this world around gender issues, and feeling strong and confident, and feeling like I have a purpose and meaning, when the world doesn’t recognize me as a gender, is a very difficult struggle. And a struggle finding meaning even though … I do not fit into one of the primary genders that is accepted by society. Every time I walk into a bathroom or every time I have to go across the mechitza (a physical gender divider in Orthodox Jewish prayer spaces), in divided gender lines, by my biological assigned gender, I feel like I lack meaning, that my meaning is taken away. It’s hard for me to be empowered when I don’t even have a box to check or a bathroom to go to that I feel signifies who I am. Even though I try to talk myself up and try to empower myself, that I have space, or I have meaning, I feel like I lack meaning when I’m in gender-divided spaces.”

For Lee the binary understanding of gender within which our society functions negates his access to meaning. For both Lee and Edward’s situation it is difficult to know who is ultimately responsible for their meaning dilemmas. In Lee’s example, one might point the finger at society and demand that bathrooms and prayer spaces are created with transgender people in mind. Or, one can lean on Lee and suggest that he works harder to shift his perspective of cultural rules and try not to see himself as being oppressed. The solution is beyond the scope of this study, but the question of cultural conflicts to meaning was an interesting finding in the narrative data. I will continue to discuss the phenomenon of cultural conflict to meaning in the following subsection.

Discussion on Culture and Meaning

Baumeister (1991) emphasized that culture is the pool from which people draw personal meaning. Daniel Quinn (1995; 1996; 2002; 2006) novelist and cultural anthropologist would say that if we listen closely to the stories of the participants we can
hear “Mother Culture” uttering her subliminal message to conform to a specific life path that is deemed acceptable. This acceptable life path is to keep progressing to secure an ever-approaching future. Our younger participants (Evan, Thina, and Edward) expressed an unsettled feeling because they were still unsure of what they wanted to do with their lives.

Though our society provides opportunities to find meaningful and sustainable careers, Quinn points out that a problem does arise when you factor in the bio-psycho-social-spiritual criterion of diversity. There is nothing in the physical world that is of a singular nature and this should extend to what makes a life meaningful. The life stories of our participants raise the question, what happens when people cannot fit comfortably into the cultural rule for a meaningful life? What occurs when someone’s meaning through being is not supported by culture?

I have already discussed in the previous subsection the stories of Lee and Edward whom have both felt barred from personal meaning because of the cultural rules of binary gender and limited access to financial stability. Our dominant culture appears to be propagated in a way that does not allow all people an equal access to a meaningful life. As I have reviewed in chapter 2, Baumeister (1991) suggested that having meaning is connected to an individual’s sense of: (1) purpose, (2) value for what one is engaged in, (3) efficacy that one can skillfully meet life’s challenges, and, (4) self-worth and basic human dignity. For many of the participants there were struggles in at least one of the above four needs of meaning because a piece of their essential being was denied by the world around them. Louis’ being was dismissed because he is gay. Aria felt rejected because she is a person of color. Bella was unable to settle into the value system that her
parents tried to impose upon her. Kate met adversity walking away from her marriage. Daryl’s adolescent environment was unappreciative of his intellect and drive for a more authentic life.

For most of our participants these meaning struggles with cultural rules seem to have been overcome. Bella, for example, was able to live by her own time table and found a way to integrate her personal values into “mainstream” society. Kate jumped into the unknown and landed on her feet, continuing to be a supportive mother and manage a lucrative counseling business. Louis came to accept himself as a homosexual and found that a life of service provided him an endless source of meaning. Some of the younger participants have also been able to secure a sense of purpose, value, efficacy, and self-worth. Aria received validation that her early-year struggles are meaningful to others and that she can accomplish the goals she has set out to achieve. Lee has discovered a work path where his life story gives him an advantage over other co-workers who may have come from a more privileged background.

Still, Lee continues to struggle with meaning in the face of popular culture as his gender identity is not affirmed. And what of Thina and Edward, who still seem unresolved in their meaning struggle for a meaningful career? Or, Yarran who seems closed to the idea of a meaningful sense of being? It seems as if struggling for meaning in the face of cultural rules is inevitable. Even Evan and Thomas, who have more privileged identities, shared stories of struggle in their meaning through being; Evan in his search for an authentic spirituality and Thomas in his quest for a sustained sense of belongingness. Why are some individual able to maneuver through cultural meaning
conflicts, while other cannot? I will leave this discussion open and return to it towards the end of this chapter.

**Conclusion of Theme 2: Meaning Through Discovery Leading to Creation of Meaning**

In the theme exploration at the start of this chapter, I demonstrated that there is an experiential difference between *discovery of meaning* and *creation of meaning*. *Discovery of meaning* seems to be more of a surprise where meaning is revealed through a person’s interaction with the world; it seems to be connected with an element of mystery. The *discovery* can take numerous forms, for example a person can realize the importance of a specific value, or receive validation about one’s life path. *Discovery of meaning* is a process by which a person renews their connection to what is meaningful to them, sourced in their *meaning through being*. *Creation of meaning* is an active process of manipulating one’s environment to expand on and manifest what they have discovered. The two processes can work in a spiral pattern, beginning with *discovery* which leads to *creation* and so on.

While it is arguable that one cannot have a sense of who they are without purposefully interacting with the world first, it is the claim of this study that there is a difference between meaningful actions (*meaning through doing*) that are inspired by being versus random engagement with the world. Both types of engagement may lead to *discovery of meaning*, though only with a sense of *meaning through being* in place can one engage in meaningful action. I have also demonstrated how cultural rules can hinder a person from using their discovered meaning in order to create further experiences of meaning in their lives. As an issue of social justice, the individuals who make up society may be held accountable for the cultural shift that may need to take place to
accommodate more diverse meaning pathways that are rooted in each person’s meaning through being.

Integrating Theory: Meaning Affirmation

The above theme about discovery of meaning and creation of meaning sheds light on the Park & Folkman (1997) Model of Global and Situational Meaning. Their model is comprised of two levels of meaning. Global meaning is comprised of beliefs about the world, beliefs about the self, and beliefs about the self in the world. Global meaning is conceptualized as generally stable. Situational meaning is an encounter with one’s environment and is a process whereby a person attempts to fit the outside world into their inner world, or Global meaning. If a conflict arises between the Situational and Global meanings there can either be, (1) a reappraisal of the situation to cohere to one’s Global meaning, (2) one might experience a shift in their Global meaning, or, (3) there can be no resolution in a Rumination state. This conflict between levels of meaning is the state of searching for meaning. I will make claims, that in light of the presented analysis and themes thus far, the idea of “search for meaning” does not accurately capture the human experience and that the alternatives, confirmation, affirmation, or assertion of meaning is more suitable. The term affirmation is borrowed from May (1983) who wrote about meaning-making as self-affirmation.

My understanding of the creation and discovery of meaning processes confirms the Park & Folkman (1997) model as there were stories that exemplified the conflict between levels of meaning and the three possible solutions. Evans conflict with faith is an example of situational reassessment to appease Global meaning. He expressed the belief that religion and spirituality should be based on personal relationships with the divine.
When he encountered, through a discussion with a friend, the possibility of living a more structured religious life, he became troubled. Evan resolved this conflict by deciding that he needed more structure in his life in terms of creating more authentic meaningful moments in his life and thus he maintained his Global belief about personal religion and spirituality.

There seemed to be more stories about a change in Global meaning than in reassessing Situational meaning. This might be connected with the large number of stories in the *New Vision of Self* story type (See Table 1.) which is another way of saying a shift in Global meaning. Aria learning that her father was beaten up by police and arrested, Louis coming to terms with his sexual orientation, Lee accepting himself as Transgender, and Kate divorcing her husband and leaving a known life of security are all examples of individuals who had to modify their beliefs about the self in the world in order to live authentic and meaningful lives. Perhaps a shift in Global meaning is seen as a more meaningful story than a reassessment of Situational meaning. This speculation is logical given that a change in Global meaning is a profound core transformation.

States of Rumination were also expressed. Edward shared very specific beliefs about what would make his life fulfilling. His experience though is that the social system is set up to antagonize him. When he reflected on this, Edward continued to talk himself into deeper pit of despair – that his situation would not change, and anger about the world he inhabits. During his participant check of his participant summary, Edward agreed that he has trouble seeing how he can create more of a meaningful life given his current financial struggle. He offered no attempt during the interview to see his struggle in a different way, or to reinterpret his beliefs about fulfillment. His story seems to be a
classic fit into the Rumination category of the Park & Folkman model. The results of this dissertation study do not only confirm their model. My interpretation of the narratives seem to provide deeper insight into the processes that create a sense of coherence in Global meaning and also suggest that Global meaning is constantly evolving.

The Active Process of Global Meaning Stability

When an individual is not in a state of meaning conflict between Global and Situational meaning, there is still a process of affirmation (May, 1983) that is taking place in Global meaning. This affirmation process is the integration of meaning through being and meaning through doing that is constantly occurring through the processes of creation of meaning and discovery of meaning. Meaning integration is the personal assertion of the “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1962). Though this integration is occurring regularly it is not always an ordinary experience and is worth exploring further.

As will be seen in the fourth theme delivered in the next chapter (Exploring and expanding the sacred), the affirmation of one’s beliefs can be quite profound and can even lead to a heightened experience of self. For example, Thomas shared about an experience of cosmic oneness, which confirmed and expanded upon his sense of belongingness – a core element of his being. Bella, similarly, shared a story about a vision of her deceased Grandfather who appeared to her auspiciously on a Saturday morning leading up to her Bat Mitzvah. When asked about the meaning of the encounter, Bella stated:

"It was like I was fulfilling my soul’s mission for that moment in time. And he was there, loving me in a way he always did, and blessing me. And just kind of enveloping me. It was so—it was one of the more prominent mystical experiences I’ve had … But the significance of it was that it was like coming into my own, but coming into—it was like, I had this heritage. I was named for his father. He was a rabbi. There was something that was supposed to happen for me"
This was not a moment of meaning conflict for Bella that got resolved; rather it was an experience of affirmation in which she felt a heightened sense of certainty pertaining to her life path. Bella’s story is an example of discovery of meaning because she awoke to a piece of herself that she did not know existed. Thus, Global meaning can be maintained by discovery of meaning. Global meaning can also be maintained by creation of meaning. For example, Yarran, who methodically identifies achievable goals for himself in order to maintain a sense of personal fulfillment, is a master “creator of meaning.”

The model presented in Figure provides a mapping of the processes that occur within the Global meaning structure. It emphasizes that “searching for meaning” is always taking place, even in times of Global and Situational meaning congruence. Given the exploration of the above themes, 1 and 2, through the narrative data, I suggest that more accurate terms for “searching for meaning” would be confirming, asserting, or affirming meaning. Using the later terminology emphasizes the presence of being-ness, discussed in chapter 5, which is always available to the individual. A final point of emphasis that is provided by my model is that there is truly nothing constant about the healthy Global meaning structure. Rather it is in a constant state of creation and discovery as the “will to meaning” drives us to ceaselessly affirm our raw experience of meaning through being. The only consistent element is that of being, within which affirmation of meaning – by creation or discovery – takes place. The following section lays out the third theme which examines more closely the process of creation of meaning. The narratives of the participants displayed different attitudes towards engagement with
the world to create meaning and these fit under the umbrella theme, *Willful versus Willing approach to creating meaning.*

Theme 3: Meaning through Willful versus Willing Approaches to Creating Meaning

Throughout the stories told the attitude by which one approached *creation of meaning* can be interpreted as either “willful” or “willing.” “Willful” would be a direct approach to *creation of meaning*, where the individual attempts to exert control over his or her situation. “Willing” describes an attitude of letting go of control and, at first glance, might imply a passive approach to *creation of meaning*. Gerald May (1982) wrote about the same dichotomy and its relationship to personal meaning in his book, *Will and Spirit*.

May looked at willingness as self-surrender to the mystery of life. “Willingness” is the attitude of saying yes to what one encounters in each moment. In May’s words, “willingness implies a surrendering of one’s self-separateness, an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself” (p.6). The opposite, “willfulness,” was described as a clinging to self-mastery. Of “willfulness,” May explained, “is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control, or otherwise manipulate existence” (p.6). It is vital to talk about these different attitudes towards *creation of meaning* lest one err in thinking that *creation of meaning* is always likened to “willfulness.” Also, it would be untrue to say that “willingness” equals passivity. As I will explore shortly an individual can be passively-willful or actively-willing.

May thought that this conflict, to choose between self-surrender and self-mastery (or the mastery versus mystery conflict) existed in every moment. This is similar to the
two decision making processes described by Maddi (1998) (“choosing the past” or “choosing the future) which are connected to his concept of hardiness. Choosing mastery is a choice of the past as it is a holding on to what is known. Choosing surrender is a choice of the future as it opens one up for the limitless possibilities that may arise. Similarly to Maddi, who seemed to favor “choosing the future,” May exalted “willingness” as the exclusive path to personal meaning. In his study he found that “willfulness” can illuminate the hows of life, but only “willingness” can help a person understand the whys of life. “The problem is that willfulness,” May (1982) wrote, “simply cannot speak to our need for meaning. A willful approach to life can yield some understanding of how life happens and even some guidance as to how to behave, but it illuminates nothing of the whys and what-fors of life” (p.8).

With this understanding of the terms “willfulness” and “willingness,” I will now examine how they have appeared in the stories of the participants. It will be argued that the dichotomy of “willfulness” versus “willingness” is more complicated as it was noted that one can be willingly active, or willfully passive. Below are narrative excerpts that seem to represent different combinations of “willfulness” and “willingness” with degrees of action and letting go. Following this examination I will draw conclusions about the different attitudes in terms of meaning affirmation.

Edward’s approach to creation of meaning seems to fit nicely into classic “willfulness.” He perceives society as something that is working against him and he must actively strive to find room for his own happiness and comfort. In response to the question about what he feels the world is asking of him at this moment, Edward responded,
I feel like the world is being a pain in the ass right now, because C. and I are trying to save money, so that we can afford some things that for us would be luxuries, and for regular people are normal things. Like, we would like to get, like simple things, like we would like to be debt free. But it seems like every time we’re close to getting to that … Like the truck broke, and we had to put a thousand, five hundred bucks on it, and blah. It feels like, you know, just let us be, so we can save enough to be … Like one of these days the kids are going to want to go to college, we need enough money to not be debt free, so we can afford the basic things.

So I don’t know if it’s the world, but it just feels like, you know like, some rich dude wins $270 million already in the lottery, even though he was already rich, but these poor people— and I try to do as much as I can, I try to save as much money, but it just—it feels like money is like, they say money doesn’t buy anybody happiness, but I’m saying that whoever has it at least has more of an ease of not having to struggle to be able to afford his medication, or to get better health insurance, to send their kids to better schools, to not have a car that breaks down every two seconds, so I think that right now that’s the biggest worry. To be financially stable. So I feel like the world tries to prevent that a lot.

Edward is stunted in his ability to create meaningful experiences for himself because, in his perception, he lives under the tyranny of an unjust world. I get the sense that he is fighting to maintain a small piece of control in his own life and as mentioned above in the subsection above, he appears to be stuck in the Rumination stage of the Park & Folkman model (1997).

Another explanation could be that what is currently meaningful for Edward is to maintain stability, and as such, he is actively engaged in what is meaningful for him. I would argue against this explanation because Edward does not seem to find any fulfillment in the struggle he described above and he clearly would choose another path if he thought it was accessible to him. Edward appears to be acting out of a sense of obligation from the outside world and does not affirm his sense of being through this conflict. The above example of active-willfulness is contrasted with Kate’s approach of a, “letting go”-willingness.
Kate: … and I think it’s by faith, that it’s happening by faith, and it’s not even my own, I mean, yes it’s coming through me, but even, it says in the Scriptures that faith is a gift, I feel like everything is a gift now, and everything I do is—I can’t believe I have come this far given what had happened, and the juggling I do, I’m just very struck with how God can make anything out of fishes and loaves, which is--

Interviewer: [Unintelligible] Say that again,

Kate: Fishes and loaves, the story—

Interviewer: Oh, fishes and loaves.

Kate: There’s a parable where there’s not enough to eat, and, his disciples say “We don’t have enough food, there’s no Pizza Hut, there’s nothing around! What are we going to do? People are going to get hungry being in the sun and coming to see You.” Or whatever it is … So he just took a simple fish and a simple loaf from a simple boy, and it multiplied. And I feel like my life is [unintelligible] multiplication, not to count my … chickens before they’re hatched, but I just see everything as a miracle and a gift now, because I know it’s not all up to me, I know it’s just through me …

And later Kate spoke about how letting go has served her in her life.

I’ve had more energy freed up, there’s more freedom allowed by the energy I’ve been given by just letting go of stuff. Do you know what I mean? Letting go of the idea that my kids are mine, letting go of the idea that my marriage is mine, letting go of the idea that my career’s my career, it’s only like after that all that was kinda like, let go, ‘not your will but mine,’ type of thing that it’s all kinda come back to me.

Kate shared about an attitude of complete openness towards the world as she creates a meaningful path for herself. Her willingness seems to have a strong religious and spiritual faith at its center. I am reluctant to title her style of “willingness” as passive. I do not think that it honors the effort and struggle that she has put into her life journey. Therefore, I prefer the term “letting go”-willingness, or complete-willingness.

Similarly, Bella put God at the center of her “willingness.” Interestingly, in Bella’s stories, I speculate that there appears to be more of a focused, almost active-willingness approach to creation of meaning. The following is an excerpt from Bella’s
I was sure I wanted to go to W. College. I spent a lot of time with the application, and just kind of dashed off the one for B. S. College. Baruch Hashem [Blessed is the Name], when I made the appointments for interviews, it turned out that B. S. was first.

And I stood on the corner of [location removed], and the whole world was passing by. Everybody in the world was there. And the whole city just hummed and vibrated, just like me. I am a New Yorker. And, I went in and met with a woman who could have been one of my aunts. And I walked in and just knew not to even try to impress her. That she saw through me the moment she looked at me, and that all I could be with her was totally honest. And she was just amazing.

And they offered me nothing. I had no idea how I was going to support my children and pay my tuition and pay rent and all of this. It was like everything else, I just had to face—to do it. When I went to W. a few days later, they offered me a very generous scholarship, very cheap housing, an internship with Professor X., who was a hero of mine in those days, and just about anything else I wanted—I could have written my ticket.

And I went back to New York, and my mother and brother and my kids and I all went for Chinese food in Chinatown, and I said to my mother and brother, “Am I crazy? Everything in me is telling me, ‘Go to B. S.’” And in one voice, they said to me, “Follow your heart.” And I did.

And B. S. was so pivotal, the experience of B. S. was so pivotal. If the chapter before was finding myself as a person in community and before that, a spiritual being, this was finding my intellect. I was 40 years old, and for the first time in my life, realized I was a smart person. How do you get to be 40 and not know that you’re smart, if you are smart, right? For the first time in my life I was in school because I wanted to be in school, it was the school I wanted to be in, and everything was so new and exciting.

In Bella’s account she revealed that she had a very strong focus and intention. She wanted to go back to school and to learn in a specific school even though her choice made no practical sense. Bella was able to let go of her worldly concerns and jump into the unknown. I envision that her jump was not a free fall; it was an aimed dive. Bella seemed to blend “willingness” and “willfulness,” though experientially she seemed to lead with her ability to let go. Lee also seemed to mix “willfulness” with “willingness,” though his blend seemed to be more concentrated with “willfulness.”

Yeah, after college I went and worked on Capitol Hill, that was my final transplant from lower-class to upper-class elite, having my background and where
I come from having to be in the shadow, not being able to speak the way I wanted to, write the way I wanted to, express myself the way I wanted to, really being oppressed by that culture. I guess the title of that chapter would be “The Policy World,” “Lee in the Policy World.” That was my first introduction, but I feel like this past year I’ve really been empowered with myself, where I come from, who I am.

I did this fellowship called the [name removed], and this was the first time I felt I could actually talk with my peers and my colleagues about my experiences growing up poor. And it really helped me integrate being okay with my stories and sharing my stories, and using that in my work/professional life, and not have to separate the two. Even though I am a professional, I have professional skills, I still have an additional asset that I bring to the table that many people who work in the policy field don’t have, and that’s living the reality, having lived the policy changes that need to happen. So that was really empowering.

Lee’s involvement in the policy world is an active and willful engagement with his environment to create meaning in his life. The “willingness” for Lee seems to come in his acceptance of his past as a crucial element that gives meaning to the activity. Thus, Lee’s narrative represents a fourth possibility along the “willful” to “willing” spectrum – open and accepting willfulness.

The above excerpts have shown that the idea of “willfulness” versus “willingness” in regards to creation of meaning is too simple a model. The participants in this study demonstrated at least four different categories. These being: pure willfulness, willfulness with acceptance, directed willingness, and pure willingness. From the four presented it seemed that the active willfulness approach was connected to feelings of hopelessness and frustration for the participant. In Edward’s narrative May’s (1982) idea about the disconnection between meaning and willfulness is held up. The other three categories were prerequisites to a well-adjusted attitude towards meaning. The theme suggests that willingness in any degree is needed to affirm a sense of meaning and fulfillment.
With an examination of *creation of meaning* styles complete, I can return to the question that was left earlier in this chapter, *how are some individuals able to cope with cultural conflicts of meaning, while others are not?* Already the theme of “willful” to “willing” approaches to *creation of meaning* suggests an answer. *Willingness,* to some degree, is essential in rectifying a challenge to meaning affirmation that is based in cultural rules. The following section will explore another possible answer that is centered on stage of ego development (Loevinger, 1976).

**Exploring the Propensity for Affirming Meaning**

One question that still remains unanswered is: *how might one person be more adept at meaning affirmation than another?* This question stems from the discussion about how individuals can run into cultural conflicts with meaning. People seem to be able to discover meaning, and then may find it hard to create meaning thereafter. I presented Edward as having discovered a sense of meaning in his connection with the natural world, though he feels barred by society to create meaningful experiences for himself. Similarly Lee has a barred sense of meaning in that his gender identity is not honored. It was also suggested that many of the participants had a struggle in meaning affirmation due to a conflict with cultural norms. For example, Thina is uncertain if her work decision will continue to be fulfilling. Evan’s search for an authentic spirituality put him against the cultural norm of conformity. Kate had to prevail over the negative attitude toward her divorce. Why were some participants able to overcome these cultural conflicts while others are unable?

One cannot suggest that chronological development is the answer which dictates success in the struggle for meaning. I have given examples of how the needs of meaning
have been secured by both younger and older participants. An alternative answer, which might play into a secured sense of meaning through being, is ego development (Loevinger, 1976).

**Stages of Ego Development**

As individuals encounter the world their ego is thought to develop through non-linear stages. Loevinger wrote that there is, “no highest stage but only an opening to new possibilities” (p.26). The developing ego begins completely enmeshed with the world, and through a process of differentiation evolves into an entity that is separate, yet connected to other beings in the world. The crucial stage that I chose to evaluate the stories on is the *Self-Aware Level: Transition from Conformist to Conscientious Stages (I-3/4)*. It is the stage where most adults appear to crest in our society, and it marks a transition between external to internal motivated behavior. Below is a brief description of each stage (pp. 15 – 28).

*Presocial Stage (I-1)* – The ego is thought of as not present and the individual must differentiate the self from the rest of the world. This differentiation is the process of “construction of reality” (p.15).

*Symbiotic Stage (I-1)* – There is a clear differentiation between the self and the world, though there still is a symbiotic relationship between the self and care-taker.

*Impulsive Stage (I-2)* – Individual impulses continue to affirm the separate self. Cognitive processes tend to be black and white based on how someone acts towards the individual. People are valued by what they can give. The individual is mostly concerned with the present and not much on causation.
**Self Protective Stage (Delta Δ)** – The individual anticipates immediate short-term reward and punishments. The stage is characterized by vulnerability and guardedness. Blame is usually placed externally. The stage is characterized by a sense of there being one winner.

**Conformist Stage (I-3)** – The individual identifies his or her own welfare with that of the group (i.e. family or peer group). A strong element of trust must be present. Rules are followed in order to fit in and less so out of fear of punishment. Feeling like an outsider is punishment enough. In this stage there is a trusting of one’s own group, and an easy disapproval of any external group. Conformity is based on external behaviors.

**Self-Aware Level: Transition from Conformist to Conscientious Stages (I-3/4)** – This is the stage that I attend to most in interpreting to answer the question which heads this section. There is a marked increase in awareness and appreciation for multiple possibilities. There is a moving away from the notion that there is, *one rule for everyone in the group*, or, *one rule for all groups*. The litmus test, though, for acceptance or rejection of the self and other is still the group experience.

**Conscientious Stage (I-4)** – The individual develops long term, self-evaluated goals and ideals, differentiated self-criticism, and a sense of responsibility. There is an internalization of rules, meaning that the individual evaluates and chooses rules for the self. Achievement is judged by one’s own standards and no longer by recognition or competition. Good or bad polarities become more complex, and the existence of multiple polarities is possible. The individual develops a deep interpersonal life and recognition of emotions and patterns of others.
Individualistic Level: Transition from Conscientious to Autonomous Stage (I-4/5)

— A heightened sense of individuality and concern for emotional dependence develops. There is awareness that physical separation does not imply emotional separation and an increased tolerance for the self and for others. The cause of conflict is seen as shared between the internal self and with the external system. There is a greater tolerance for paradox.

Autonomous Stage (I-5) – The individual can acknowledge and cope with internal conflict which may revolve around the issue of needs versus duties. Reality is seen as complex and multifaceted. There is a tolerance for ambiguity and an ability to unite opposites. Loevinger states that at this stage parents develop the willingness to let children make their own mistakes as they recognize the need for others to have autonomy (p.23). At the same time though, individuals recognize that autonomy cannot be total as there is always an emotional connection.

Integrated Stage (I-6) – Loevinger stated that this is a rare stage where the individual is able to transcend the conflicts of the Autonomy Stage. This might mean finding unity in fulfillment and achievement, and experiencing the universe with the self included as non-dual. The individual experiences a consolidation of a sense of identity.

Ego Development and Meaning through Being

As pointed out by Loevinger, a crucial point of ego development is when the individual internalizes rules and make choices out of a sense of personal agency and a sense of authenticity. Thus, most adults waffle in the Self-Aware Level (I-3/4), which is seen as a transitional stage from the Conformist Stage (I-3) to Conscientious Stage (I-4). Loevinger wrote, “How people liberate themselves from the dominion of external
rewards and punishments is a central mystery of human development and one of the lures that leads us to our subject matter” (p. 28).

If I maintain the understanding that the stages are not necessarily linear and that I can only comment on the participants in terms of their relationship to personal meaning, it is possible to evaluate their stories with the above stage criteria. An exploration of the alignment of their stage of ego development (at least in or beyond the Self-Aware level) with their sense of meaning through being will provide insight into their ability to cope with cultural conflicts with meaning. Bella serves as an example of someone who has functioned passed the Self-Aware level. Since her divorce she has lived on her own timeline. She authentically explored alternative lifestyles and strived to live with a changing set of values. Bella also ensured that her children would grow up with the sense of autonomy which she struggled to secure. She appears to have a healthy sense and balance of both meaning through doing and meaning through being and is able to create further experiences of her discovered personal meaning. Another ability that Bella demonstrated through her interview is that her sense of personal meaning was not static.

Thomas too appears to maintain a healthy sense and balance of both meaning through doing and meaning through being. He explored how he discovered different elements of personal meaning and how those discoveries have influenced his creation of meaning. Though he is younger than Bella he seems to have carved a path of his own that included trying out different lifestyles and walking away from choices that no longer served him. For example, Thomas decided to leave the Catholic clergy route after taking his vows. As discussed earlier in this chapter, his sense of personal meaning seems to be connected with a sense of belongingness. Although belongingness is connected with a
sense of external validation, it is a value that Thomas seems to hold deeply and evaluates internally. His desire to belong stems from his childhood, so it is a long-term and time tested value, and he does not aim to belong to any specific group, rather more of an amorphous sense, similar to a “will to meaning,” of being able to say, *I belong.* Thus, I suspect that Thomas too has surpassed the *Self-aware Level* of ego development.

In comparison to Bella and Thomas, Edward’s narrative ended with a continued sense of struggle in his *meaning through doing* and *meaning through being.* Edward reported that ultimately he was not satisfied in his current job because he feels that he is underpaid and he is aware that he has an unfulfilled passion that is more meaningful for him. In Edward’s narrative he struggles with the basic needs of meaning because of his relationship with society. *He cannot see himself as worthy because he does not see himself as valued by society.* As mentioned in the previous subsection, his *discovery of meaning* cannot find its way into *creation of meaning.* Edward seems to be ruminating in the *Self-Aware level,* caught in limbo between internal and external rules and validation.

Lee finds great meaning in the work that he does. A major reason for his satisfaction is that he finds meaning in his early struggles through his current work on policy. In one sense Lee demonstrated meaning integration, though he still struggles to find meaning in a world that privileges a binary gender categorization. Lee’s *meaning through being* is challenged daily and according to Lee, it is the culture that needs to accommodate him and not the other way around. In a sense Lee is seeking external validation for his Trans identity from the world around him (though the situation can also be read as an issue of built-in cultural discrimination). Lee, when it comes to his *meaning through being* connected with gender identity, seems to be at the *Self-Aware level.*
Yarran’s narrative presented a unique look at meaning through being as it relates to ego development. Yarran presented as a well-adjusted individual who is content with his life path. He does not concern himself with ultimate meaning or a greater sense of purpose. Yarran is focused on friendship and fitting in with his peer group. He does not see himself as a leader and seems to flow with cultural norms. In this regard, Yarran is also at the Self-Aware level. Yarran’s narrative style sent up a read flag for me because he was not at all reflective about his meaning through being and even resisted the idea of looking into personal meaning. He commented, “I’m not a really big thinker, you know, like to be honest, like uh, [Laughs.] I don’t, I don’t contemplate the meaning of life very much.”

For Yarran, I got the impression that thinking about meaning is like opening Pandora’s Box: meaning is something that is better left unopened. It might be that Yarran does not value a progression toward greater individualism and autonomy, and thus maintains an external focus on progress. It also might be that growing up an African American male in a culture that favors Caucasian men taught Yarran not to strive for greater levels of personal fulfillment and satisfaction. Further research into Yarran’s case might repeat the narrative inquiry technique used here though with a sample of African American men.

*Drawing Conclusions from Ego and Being*

In the above subsection of our discussion we looked at the narratives of five participants through the lens of Loevinger’s (1976) stages of ego development. We specifically looked at the transitional Self-Aware level where individuals tend to move from externalized to internalized rules about the self and others, including rules about
personal meaning. We explored the possible relatedness between a person’s ability to secure a sense of *meaning through being* and their stage of ego development as seen through the stories they told. I would like to suggest the following conclusions based on the analysis: (1) Conflicts with cultural norms do create struggles with *meaning through being*, as they can put up a barrier between discovered and created meaning. (2) Participants who function at an ego stage with internalized and flexible personal rules and a greater capacity for paradox are able to resolve cultural conflicts and compose a sense of *meaning through being*. (3) With certain issues it is beyond the individual’s ability to change their relationship to cultural norms, and society at large should be held accountable to change cultural norms. A failure to do so conflicts with a person’s access to a sense of dignity and is a threat to the bio-psycho-social-spiritual “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1962). (4) Stories of oppression need to be explored further in order to understand underprivileged people’s relationship to *meaning through being* and ego development.

Chapter VI Conclusion

In this chapter I set out to address the second research question, which after encountering the narratives was modified to, *how might creation of meaning and discovery of meaning play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?* The answer was attended to in two major themes. The first theme looked at the distinction between the *discovery of meaning* and the *creation of meaning*. I interpreted that both processes enabled the narrator to become aware of their experience of being through their *meaning through being*, though with *creation of meaning* there is a well thought intention behind the action which spawned meaning. In *discovery of meaning* there is more of the
element of surprise and mystery where the person might uncover something meaningful in their world or inside of themselves.

As part of the learning from the narratives, I also proposed that discovery of meaning is a starting point for creation of meaning. This sequence was seen in the stories as participants would often reflect on meaning that they had discovered previous to the act of meaning creation. This somewhat obvious idea actually provides unique insight into how the participants ensured a sense of sustained meaning in their life. One has to be open to mystery and the unexpected nature of worldly interaction. Personal meaning should never, and can never be stagnant.

This first theme had implications for the Park & Folkman (1997) model. I asserted that Global meaning is not a stagnant state and there is always the process of meaning integration and the cycle of discovery to creation occurring. I suggested that instead of “searching for meaning,” meaning theorists adopt the terms, confirming, affirming, or asserting meaning as they honor the constant being experience that is at the core of the meaning experience.

In the second theme I explored more intimately the process of creation of meaning by looking at four distinct categories along a, “willfulness” to “willingness” spectrum to encountering the world. Much more than just an exploration of active and passive approaches to meaning affirmation, the third theme of this dissertation explored the dynamics of self-mastery versus self-surrender (May, 1982). I concluded that personal meaning would most likely arise out of an approach that included “willingness” to some degree and that complete “willfulness” would probably leave a person in rumination when faced with a cultural conflict to their meaning agenda. The end of the
chapter tackled the question of why are some people more adept at dealing with cultural conflicts to meaning than others. Aside from willful to willing approaches to creation of meaning, I proposed stages of ego development as an explanation. Living one’s life based on internal and flexible rules which tolerate paradox seems to correspond with an ability to transmit the discovery of meaning to the creation of meaning. In the final hybrid result-discussion chapter 7, I will look at the implications that the narratives shared have for the religious- and spiritual-based theories that were introduced earlier in chapter 2.
CHAPTER VII
Embracing Religion and Spirituality of the Physical World

Defining and Refining the Third Research Question

This chapter addresses the third research question,

*how does one’s spiritual or religious life impact the interplay of meaning-making through action or meaning-seeking encountered as part of one’s pure existence?*

Before exploring an answer to the question it is crucial to deconstruct the question and show how my thinking about this question evolved as I analyzed the narrative data. When I began this study I conceptualized three categories for spiritual or religious life. These were: (1) a category for people who are religious and spiritual, (2) a category for people who identify as only spiritual, and, (3) a category for people who identified as neither. When I asked about the religion and spirituality of the participants I would usually receive an explanation of one’s religious/spiritual identity. It became clear to me that a neat categorization of religion and spirituality was not inline with narrative inquiry. For example my discussion with Daryl about his religious and spiritual connection went as follows,

*Interviewer: And can you give me a little about your relationship with religion—do you identify yourself as a member of a particular religion?*

Daryl: I don’t consider myself a religious person, I consider myself a spiritual person. The church that I attend when I do attend is non-denominational. I tried the Catholic church, I tried the Baptist church, and I got tired of sitting in the pews and them telling me I’m going to hell. I’m like, ‘What? No. I don’t accept that.’ And so the church that I attend is more a progressive, non-denominational, new-age church that uses practical knowledge to help you deal with life on a day-to-day basis, if that makes sense.

Daryl was one of the last participants that I interviewed. It seemed that because of his sexual orientation he was not able to find a spiritual home in a traditional church, so he
began going to a more progressive community church. His answer though still did not address the information that I was after. I wanted to know more about his personal connection with religion and spirituality. From previous experience, working as a pastorally-minded therapist, I asked the follow-up question which I hoped would get more to the crux of his personal spirituality:

_Interviewer: And how would you express your relationship with God, the terms you think in?_

_Daryl: I think my relationship, like everyone else’s relationship, is a personal relationship. And I don’t have to justify my relationship to you or anyone else, just like you don’t have to justify your relationship—it’s your relationship, and I’m not questioning that. So what gives you the right to question my relationship with my God. My philosophy is, all roads lead to Rome. It’s just the Church has branched out into so many different sectors, but they all are talking about the same thing—a higher power. And what makes your religion better than the next one. To me it doesn’t._

Daryl’s answer actually shocked me for a moment as I wondered if he was offended by my asking the question, or if he was releasing some frustrations he had towards the Catholic Church. I decided on the latter and left his answer alone. When I reviewed his answer, like most of the other participants, it became clear that a lot of information would be lost by simply putting Daryl in the spiritual only category. Thus when the research question involves, “one’s spiritual or religious life,” I am asking about the complex and personal nature of the individual’s religious and/or framework spiritual. In Table 1, included in chapter 4, one can see that each participant had some religious affiliation, though they each expressed this affiliation in unique terms. Therefore there are practically no overlapping labels in the Religious/Spiritual Identity column. In approaching this research question then, I viewed the participants’ religious and spiritual as distinct from one another.
The next part of the question that needs addressing is the use of the terms “meaning-making” and “meaning-seeking” that were used by Wong (2008) to make a distinction between meaning that is actively created through a social process (meaning-making) and meaning that is innately processed in a way of making sense out of the chaotic world (meaning-seeking). As I explained in the previous chapter I decided upon a creation versus discovery distinction as this dichotomy seemed more fitting to the way that the participants talked about meaning in their life. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will address the more refined question,

how does one’s personal connection to religion/spirituality impact their sense of meaning from interacting with the world in a focused process of creation and/or a reflexive process of discovery?

God and the Meaning through Being

This first subsection explores how God and faith in God is spoken about in the meaning narratives and used to create and discover meaning in one’s life. The presented textual references were chosen because they reflect differing ways in which God is used to affirm one’s meaning. I feel that this is an appropriate way to address the research question because it will expand upon the diverse nature of people’s religious and spiritual affiliations in connection with their approach to meaning affirmation.

The two participants that were most vocal about God were Kate and Louis. For both participants, their personal way of understanding God serves the function of connecting them with their meaning through being. The following two excerpts will be used to demonstrate this point. For Kate, her being is given meaning by God in that she understands that God fully accepts who she is. Kate shared,
I believe, and I feel like, God knows all our souls, God knows my soul, God--I feel more companionship now, without all this obstruction of whatever it was I shared with [my ex-husband], I feel stronger than I’ve ever felt, even in my weakness. There’s a verse that says, ‘His strength is made perfect in my weakness.’ And that sounds like a very platitude-ish type of thing, but I’m not afraid of my weaknesses anymore.

Because of Kate’s faith in God she is able to embrace what she sees as her weaknesses. This is a powerful integrative being experience as Kate is able to accept the parts of herself that she might see as weak. She is able to look at her being fully and affirm, through her understanding of God, even the pieces that are generally hidden or ignored. This ability gives her access to an additional source of meaning, which is to include the meaning of her weaknesses as a connection with God in her meaning through being.

Thus Kate is open to discover meaning through a wider acknowledgment of her identity and she is able to create meaning with a fuller sense of personal meaning. Part of Louis’ meaning narrative was the transformation that occurred between him and God.

When Louis was an adolescent he struggled to find acceptance of himself as a gay male. He found no comfort in his community or in his family, but he did find comfort in God. Louis shared,

But nonetheless, my relationship with God, which was and still is a very personal talking relationship, was very helpful. I had a sense that God didn’t ..., I think I felt that God didn’t like the fact that I was gay, but also knew that I didn’t choose it and was trying my best. So there was a sense of understanding and help, a bit.

In Louis’ primary understanding of God he had a sense that God understood and accepted him for who he was. This in turn allowed Louis to begin to find meaning in who he was as a gay teen. As was discussed in the literature review, self-acceptance is a core foundation of experiencing life as meaningful (May, 1983). Thus God exposed Louis to his meaning through being “a bit,” as Louis stated. “A bit” though was not good enough
and Louis had to experience a change in his relationship with God in order to gain fuller self-acceptance and a more solid meaningful foundation of being. At this point in Louis’ narration I suppose that he is able to discover meaning in a gay identity, though he faces a cultural conflict to use this knowledge to create further meaningful experiences. In order to solve this conflict, Louis had to undergo a shift in his Global meaning framework (Park & Folkman, 1997). As a young adult, Louis had a religious conversion experience as he discovered a God for outcasts in the concept of Jesus.

The part that’s hard for me to say is that that was intertwined with, this is a hard thing to say to you. That was intertwined with [pause] accepting Jesus, and becoming a Christian. It wasn’t rejecting my Judaism, I always considered myself a Jew. For me the issue was, I didn’t care about Christian ritual, for me the issue was having a God that isn’t about telling me what’s right and wrong, but telling me about loving the outcast.

Louis stated that the above passage was hard for him to share. The reason was that I present myself as an observant Jew and, as he later revealed to me, Louis considered that I would judge him for opening up to the idea of Jesus as God. I was able to reassure Louis that I was not judging him, though his perception of my identity definitely impacted his telling of his religious journey.

I find the above narrative very powerful as Louis is able to assert the part of him that society is trying to reject by connecting his “inner outcast” to the “transcendent outcast.” Louis aligns his perceived being as an outcast with his perception of Jesus’ being as an outcast. This is similar to Kate’s process of find meaning through being by finding acceptance of her weaknesses in her understanding of God. Louis too becomes aware of his meaning through being by finding a God that loves him as a social outcast. I surmise that this religious conversion experience removed the blockade between discovery of meaning and creation of meaning.
The final excerpt from Louis’ transcript presented here demonstrates his full integration of meaning through his understanding of God. The excerpt is part of his answer to the question about meaninglessness. Louis’ answered,

“I’ve never lost a sense of purpose and meaning and direction in my life, that comes through a relationship with God …”

His concise statement shows clearly that when Louis sees himself through God’s eyes he does not lack for meaning. The reason I have explored his narrative of religious journey is because in God, Louis finds acceptance of the being that he perceives as his core. It is just simply who he is, his I-AM that is completely validated through God. According to Louis, because of this experience, he has made amends with his Jewish heritage and has found Jewish community that supports a belief in a God that accepts homosexuality.

For Kate and Louis, I interpreted that it was important to find this validation through the eyes of God. Once they were able to open up to a God that exists in their fundamental experience that accepts them completely, they were able to experience themselves as consistently meaningful beings. Again, there connection to discovery of meaning and creation of meaning became sealed.

It seems that when individuals understand God as accepting their perceived essential being, i.e. the perceived good and the perceived bad of when we say I-AM, there is an open access point to meaning through being. It is when there is a contradiction between being and God’s acceptance of being that a religious/spiritual meaning struggle might arise. In the following excerpt from Edward’s story the italics highlight the narrative proof.

But I still feel like I agree with what Jesus talked about. I agree that you should be more like Gandhi and less like Hitler. Even though like, the people like-- and then a lot of people you see in the church are hypocrites. They go to
Edward’s narrative points out the religious hypocrisy that he experienced growing up in a Catholic community where words and actions were not always congruent. What is important for me to point out about Edward is that he is currently living with his girlfriend before marriage. It would seem that Edward, by calling attention to a gay priest who is self-condemning is seeking to assert a God who is accepting of his own relationship. A God that condemns gay people and the God that condemns premarital sex does not make fit in with Edward’s core sense of meaning with which he affirms his sense of being. Thus, the God of the Catholic faith, as Edward perceives, does not have the same effect on Edward as the personal God of Kate and the personal God of Louis has on them.

Edward began to shape a personal God manifesto (“But I still feel like I agree with what Jesus talked about. I agree that you should be more like Gandhi and less like Hitler.”), though has not seemed to find an integrative God connection as we saw in Kate’s and Louis’ narratives (“If I could start my own religion, it would be Catholicism without the bullshit.”) Edward might benefit from working on forging a personal relationship with a God who is fully accepting of his lifestyle. Maslow (1994) wrote that it is the necessary task of every individual to manicure their individual relationship with God that makes sense to them. He went as far as to urge that everyone should have their
own religion. While I do not wish to argue for the destruction of organized religions, I do think there are plenty of examples of individuals, such as Kate and Louis, who have created their own path to God which may remain within the framework of organized religion and at times burst through its borders. If people are to find meaning through being within God they must have a sense that their being is fully accepted by God. In the next section I will present the fourth major theme that I constructed from the narratives.

Continuing on with the idea of a personal spirituality (perhaps within organized religion), I will explore how meaning can be discovered when we allow God to expand beyond the boundaries of classic religious and spiritual frameworks.

Theme 4: Meaning through Encountering and Expanding the Sacred

For many participants the reflection on meaning brought up stories about encountering the sacred. The sacred, as it emerged in the participants’ narratives, is a symbol that is pregnant with meaning through being for the narrator. It is an object, moment, or person that shocks an individual into heightened awareness of who they are in the present moment and is a gateway to transcend their perception of self. By definition then, a sacred moment is a moment of discovery of meaning. A sacred story may include God language or it may be framed in secular language.

Taking this broadened scope of the sacred, one can see the idea of the sacred appearing in all stories that are about an immersion into a moment of personal transcendence. The word “sacred” is hard to define. I chose to frame the experiences of the participants as sacred in light of the way the word is used in the Hebrew Bible, as an object, event, person that is separated out to be special for the individual – kadosh in Hebrew. This is similar to Pargament & Mahoney’s (2005) view of the sacred as
sanctification. Thus, following will be stories that have been parsed out as unique by those who have lived them. The other assumption that needs to be made clear is that of Maslow (1976) who argued that spiritual experience does not have to take place in the language and symbols of the transcendent; rather they can and do involve worldly terminology and emphasis. One might say that there is a difference between, what I refer to as, psychological, or personal transcendence (Hazelton, 1975), which can be rational of trans-rational, or spiritual transcendence, which must be a trans-rational experience. (For further discussion on rational and trans-rational experience see Wilber (1995).) The distinction between personal and spiritual transcendence that I propose here appears to fit into the theological revolution discussed by Hazelton (1975), whereby the meaning of transcendence is changed in order to emphasize human experience and the immanent that is part of transcendence.

It is hard to conceptualize what a moment of immersion looks like especially when someone is telling a story about what has happened in the past. For the purpose of this analysis an experience will be seen as an immersion when the narrator, upon telling the story, seems to be reliving the story, giving a sense that they have returned to fully live the experience over. Another way immersion will be seen is if there is an increased sense of attention to particular detail in the story. This might be a thorough description of a story’s setting or an increased awareness to what someone was feeling in the moment. Following are examples of classic and broadened encounters with the sacred in meaningful stories. Thomas recounted a story that might be a considered a classic, or trans-rational, mystical experience.

I was sitting in my bed, I guess this becomes a spiritual and religious experience, but I was sitting in my bed and I had just finished reading *The
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Courage to Be. I read it in like, it’s a dense book, and I was teaching, I shouldn’t have stayed up so late, but I remember reading it in one evening, which was stupid, because there’s so much richness in it and I couldn’t get it all, but the last passage says, ‘The courage to be is rooted in a God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.’ And that just really resonated with me. And I lay in bed, just paying attention to my breath for about 50 minutes, and then I just remember my first thought was, while breathing, that I felt completely, I was at one with God. I felt directly a part of the cosmos coming in and coming out.

And I hadn’t known that before, I hadn’t been aware of that before. If I had been, it had been preconscious or unselfconscious. But I really felt connected to the cosmos—not connected to, but I felt one with the cosmos. And then I had the thought that throughout my whole life this connection with the cosmos had always been there and it had defined at some level everything I had done. And I reframed all of my life decisions at that point in terms of moving away from or moving closer to this, ‘at-one-ment’ with the cosmos.

Thomas’ account is about a sacred encounter in a classic sense. The meaningful object that Thomas encounters is the resonating verse which he quotes from The Power to Be (Tillich, 1980), “The courage to be is rooted in a God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.” He is stirred by his connection with this verse to immerse into the present moment which gave him a sense of expanded self-awareness.

The quality of immersion is seen when Thomas related in detail the sequence of events that occurred before the cosmic connection. The cosmic connection is the personal transcendent moment which is the defining criterion for a sacred encounter.

The meaning through being emerges in his final sentences, “And then I had the thought that throughout my whole life this connection with the cosmos had always been there and it had defined at some level everything I had done. And I reframed all of my life decisions at that point in terms of moving away from or moving closer to this, ‘at-one-ment’ with the cosmos.” Thomas became aware of something core to his being which, in the moment of encounter, provided a sense of ever-lasting meaning and direction (discovery of meaning). It can also be seen from the above narrative how a sacred
encounter can be seen as a moment of *being* and *doing* meaning integration. Thomas’ sense of *meaning through being* that he gets from his connection with God and the cosmos defines how he will proceed to make choices to affirm this sense of *meaning through being* that he has tapped into (*discovery of meaning*).

In order to expand upon the sacred encounter, I will present other narratives which are not framed in religious language though seem to echo the power and relevance of Thomas’ connection with the cosmos story. Yarran shared the following story about his first kiss.

I got my first kiss in high school. That was really significant. There was a girl who I was really, really interested in, and I remember building up the courage to ask her out. This is sophomore year of high school, in the spring. And I think I’d been thinking about it like literally all winter … And I built up the courage to ask her to go steady with me and she says yes, and I ask her for a kiss which she gives me. And I remember, literally I, I don’t think I’ve ever had this feeling since and, nor will I probably ever have it again, but this feeling of being on cloud nine where like, you know, um, complete kinda out-of-body experience. I guess it’s, kind of an unreal experience. I guess I would say I’ve had an experience, similar experience when I was jumping out of a plane, like, it just wasn’t real, really, like, [laughs] there’s nothing else to relate it to, so you’re just like, a bit confused, like, wow, there’s a, like, [laughs] “I guess I’m jumping out of the plane now,” this is, [laughter] this is interesting. So yeah, like, that, I had a double period first period sophomore year, I don’t remember the class, maybe chemistry, that sounds right, probably chemistry. Yes, it was chemistry, with Mr. H., um, and I, like, I just remember just, you know, not focusing on that at all, but just being in this, I don’t know, immense state of bliss …

I would like to argue that Yarran’s first kiss story is a story about a sacred encounter, similar to Thomas’ story of cosmic oneness. The story has a meaningful object that is crucial to Yarran’s meaning framework – the kiss. Yarran stated elsewhere in his interview, “Next to pursuit of certain women, I’ve wanted to do well in school more than I think, anything else …” According to Yarran, he does not contemplate higher levels of
meaning, ("I'm not a really big thinker, you know, like to be honest, like uh, [laughs] I don’t, I don’t contemplate the meaning of life very much.") so though a kiss may seem less profound than an encounter with God, for Yarran it holds the same sense of importance and has shaped the direction of his choices. When he reflected on challenge to meaning, Yarran shared,

Yarran: I’m always pushing for something, you know, I’m, I always got objectives and goals for myself, whether they be short or long-term, so I think I, that’s led me to always feel like there’s something to do with life, you know what I mean, I think that’s part of the not feeling like life is meaningless, you know, or not feeling like there’s no meaning to life.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Yarran: So you know, even if the meaning is, you know, if the only meaning of life is, you know, “finish this semester, finish this set of classes, you know, try to get this girl interested in me, um, try to make more money,” like, I don’t know.

Interviewer: So you come up with some focus

Yarran: Yeah.

Yarran does not seem to be a deep thinker about the capital M, meaning of his life. I see the kiss as the sacred object which symbolizes Yarran’s connection to meaning through being. The discovered meaning that resulted from the kiss might have been a sense of, I am loved, or, I am able to achieve. The creation of meaning that stemmed from that discovery can be seen in Yarran’s continued focus on the meaningful pursuit of connection in a similar fashion. His increased attention to detail of his emotional state following the kiss is evidence for an immersion experience. His description of his expansive state, as he entered into an, “immense state of bliss,” is evidence of a transcendent moment. Thus, Yarran’s story has the same criteria for a sacred encounter as Thomas’ cosmic connection story. As Yarran’s story takes place when he was in high
school it opens a gateway to understanding the sacred experiences of adolescents. According to Osmer & Fowler (1993) adolescence is marked by, “the emergence accounts for the ‘self-consciousness,’” and by, “the rather sudden new depth of awareness and interest in the interiority (emotions, personality patterns, ideas, thoughts, and experiences)” (pp. 182–3). It would stand to reason that a high school student can certainly have sacred encounters, though perhaps not on the level of sophistication that Thomas described. Level of sophistication aside, the sacred encounter for both participants allowed them to connect to a raw experience of meaning connected to what they assert as core to their perception of being.

By comparing Thomas’ story of cosmic transcendence with Yarran’s kiss story, I am in danger of committing the pre/trans fallacy that Wilber (1995) wrote about. The pre/trans fallacy occurs, in one direction, when one elevates a pre-rational experience to a trans-rational experience because it does not fit into worldly reason. What I am aiming to assert is not that Thomas’ and Yarran’s stories are transcendent in the same way, but rather they have similar elements that allow them to be seen as sacred to the protagonists and interpreters (in this case, me). Thomas’s story is trans-rational in his experience of transcendence from seeing himself as a separate individual to a being connected with all life. Yarran’s story is not necessarily trans-rational, but it does have the element of transcendence as he presents with an expanded vision of himself sparked by the kiss. I see Yarran’s story an account about psychological transcendence. The idea of psychological transcendence as equally meaningful to spiritual transcendence is what the comparison of these two stories show. Following is another untraditional sacred encounter told by Aria.
In this sacred encounter a rejection letter becomes a sacred object which symbolizes a perspective shift about who Aria sees herself to be.

Aria: The most special letter that I got from a university was the rejection letter from CU. I’m glad, actually it was probably better that I wasn’t there, because I probably wouldn’t have read it all the way through. She [Aria’s mother] said, ‘I want to read this to you,’ … And my mother read this thing, this letter to me, she’s like ‘Oh, I want to read this to you,’ and it said, ‘Oh, we regret to inform you that you have not been accepted to our school, such great sadness …’ You know, the usual rejection letter. I was like, ‘Ugh, why are you reading this to me?’ And she was like, ‘just bear with me,’ and halfway through it said, ‘Aria’—[begins to cry] it still gets me choked up. I don’t know why—I can talk about all these other things, but it just really— it said, ‘Aria, we recognize that your road to higher education has been harder than most. We admire your strength, and your work is admirable, and we think that any school would be lucky to accept you, and if you don’t get accepted, let us know.’

And I have that letter to this day. And my mom says that at some point, I don’t remember where I was or whatever, they called and spoke with her and said, ‘Did she get in? We don’t have the money to offer her, but if she didn’t get in, she’s accepted, we know you can’t afford to send her, we don’t have a scholarship …’ But that letter just means the world to me.

Aria’s story has the same elements of the two previous sacred encounter stories. There is a sacred object (the letter), an immersion experience (evidenced by reliving the story by feeling the past emotions in the present), and a psychological transcendent experience (evidenced by a new sense of validation for who she perceives herself to be). In her answer to the follow-up question she further explains how this encounter was indeed transcendent.

Interviewer: Tell me, what’s the meaning of that for you?

Aria: It validated my experience, and it said to me that the meaning I ascribed to my life, somebody who didn’t know me, who sorts through thousands of applications, however many applications CU sorts through on any given year, that my story resonated with them, and that they believed it was honest, because [unintelligible], people lie. That they believed it! And you know, they weren’t getting paid, like a therapist, you know, … but that meant that my experience was valid and authentic, and that somebody else found it meaningful.
Aria’s “rejection letter” authenticated her sense of meaning that is rooted in who she is and the journey that her family has taken. It seems that the encounter with the sacred summoned a moment of integration of being, where Aria saw herself as appreciated and intrinsically valuable. This experience is being labeled as sacred because it has all the elements of a sacred encounter that leads to psychological transcendence.

The three stories displayed above are about three different experiences: a cosmic encounter, a first kiss, and external validation. They are all seen as sacred stories because the objects that were encountered (religious writing, a kiss, and a letter) were symbolic of the being of the individuals. In the same way that I explored God as a connection to meaning through being, these objects represent a primal being, either through God (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank 2005), or being in itself. Thus I see from the narratives that the idea of the sacred grounded in the experience of meaning through being can be expanded beyond religious language. In connection with the main research question of this chapter, I have demonstrated how one’s religious and spiritual life, defined in broad personal terms, can provide the opportunity for continued discovery of meaning which subsequently impacts an individual’s creation of meaning.

Integration of Theme with Theory

The theme of Exploring and Expanding the Sacred supports the theories and studies presented in chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, which insist that religion and spirituality must be conceived in broader terms to include both the concepts of the immanent world and transcendent language of religion and spirituality (Maslow, 1976; Firestone, Firestone, & Catlett, 2003; Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba, & Vaitkus, 2006). Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank (2005) wrote that the sacred can be
found in the form of material objects, time and space, events and transitions, cultural products, people, psychological attributes, and roles. A sacred element can be anything that is separated out from its normal context and given special Divine significance.

In the narrative accounts of the participants, connection to the Divine through the physical world occurred in individually meaningful ways. Based on the works of Maslow (1976) and Firestone, Firestone, & Catlett (2003), I took the liberty to label encounters as sacred if they fit certain criteria, even though participants did not label them as such. The criteria were that the encounter provided them with an immersion into the moment and a self-transcendent experience.

From the data we might conceive of religion as a structure which contains within it the personalized expression of spirituality. Religion can be thought of as a particular house that you move into and your unique approach to interior design is spirituality. Thus the language that people use to talk about spiritual experiences will be just as personalized. Maslow (1976) in his work *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* warned against the complete separation of the sacred from the secular. He stated that the division would hinder many from accessing the sacred in their lives. Maslow thought that science too would be weakened as it would turn a blind-eye toward crucial experiences and phenomena of the human being. Also, he warned that if religion laid total claim to sacred experiences then anything that is not religious will become void of spirituality.

For Maslow, religious experience is rooted in and cannot be separate from the immanent world. By looking at specific stories of the participants through a sacred lens, our study bridges the chasm that was set up to separate sacred from secular experiences, or religion from science. The results affirm that personal language for what is a sacred
moment is more significant than religious language. The science that explores human experience can also be used to explore the sacred experience. Thomas experienced a moment where he feels a connection with the entire cosmos giving him a sustained sense of belongingness. Aria received a letter which gave her continued confidence in her story and its meaningfulness to others. These stories, among others reported, are different yet similarly sacred and suggest the continued importance of religion and spirituality in our lives as sources of personal meaning and catalysts for personal growth.

Sacred People

In the previous section I demonstrated how encountering an object (i.e. a verse, a kiss, or a letter) can facilitate a discovery of meaning. According to Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank (2005) people can also be sacred and an encounter with a sacred person can launch an individual into immersion and transcendence. This point was an unexpected lesson that I believe is present in my analysis. I will explore this piece of the theme by focusing on my personal encounter with Lee and his life story.

For me, Lee serves as an example of a sacred person. Lee is transgendered and his being teaches a potential lesson of transcendence as he challenges the circles he travels in to expand beyond the notion of binary gender. In a poetic way, through my analysis of Lee’s stories, he became a sacred object for me. The story presented below will show how Lee’s being challenged my meaning framework to expand.

And I remember being at a meeting for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) students of color, well, LB (Lesbian, Bisexual) students of color, and I asked the group if they’d be willing to have a trans speaker or a workshop about trans issues, because I felt uncomfortable about stuff that was being said, and I thought it would be nice to have a workshop about it. And people said, “Oh, we don’t need to do that, there’s nothing wrong with the group.” And I was basically kicked out of the group in a lot of ways, socially, and lost a lot of friends for that.
It was just interesting for me, because it was more difficult for me to navigate the situations than it was to navigate stuff in [name of state], because I had a social network and friends in [name of state], and I could relate with people better, and in college, I just felt like I came from such a different place. I couldn’t really stand being discriminated against by gay people. That lesbian and bisexual women wouldn’t want to be my friends because I identified as transgender. I didn’t understand that.

I understand this account as such: Lee was condemned for the message he was bringing. Lee’s message was his being. By wanting a Trans speaker he was making a statement to the student group to expand their notion of binary gender. He wanted space for his own gender which is transcendent of binary gender. I would argue that Lee’s story gives the reader a glimpse into the nature of a sacred object. Lee was not being anything other than his authentic self and he wanted nothing more than to be seen and heard. He wanted his primal call of \( I-AM \) to be received. When I allow Lee’s expressed being to touch within me, I am struck with a question about the correctness of a two gender system which might oppresses people like Lee. I experience a profound realization of all the ways that I have been taught that men and women space needs to be kept separate and how that message denies access for Lee to fully experience himself in this society. I also reflect on how the separation of gender has effected my own personal integration.

More to the point of my argument is that my perception of Lee being oppressed resonates within me and opens me up to the experience of myself beyond binary gender. I begin to speculate how my being, and in conjunction my meaning, can be limited because of the rules and restrictions placed on boys and men in the culture I was raised in. Thus, Lee’s authenticity of being (sacred object) inspires me to evaluate my own authenticity (immersion) and entertain the possibility of living more fully beyond such restrictions (transcendence).
Lee’s story is different from the other stories of sacred encounter because it is a story about the meaning a person has in being the sacred object. While Lee’s personal stories did not focus on a sacred encounter or a clear moment of personal transcendence, his presence and actions challenge those around him to expand beyond their personal ideas of gender as purely a biological concept. I have shown how his story has impacted my own sense of meaning through being and has helped me to bridge nearer my own gap between discovery of meaning and creation of meaning.

**Conclusion of the Theme: Meaning through Encountering and Expanding the Sacred**

The above stories exemplify how the sacred can be seen as objects, moments in times, or actions. In each of the stories, the encounter with the sacred seemed to expand the person beyond their normal experience of themselves. There was an element of surprise which was emotionally charged with hope and self-acceptance. In most cases, there was a follow up with a clear direction for what the narrator needed to do next in order to draw out further their sense of personal meaning. In other words, the sacred encounter demonstrated the flow from discovery of meaning to creation of meaning that was rooted in their personal religious and spiritual frameworks.

What I hope is clear is that the sacred encounter is an encounter with an object that is filled with personal meaning for the one encountering. Upon connection with the object, the one encountering experiences an assertion of their meaning through being which returns them to their ever-present and boundless experience of being; being that is a foreground to identity. This assertion can occur through psychological or spiritual transcendence, or whether the experience can be labeled rational or trans-rational. Hardiness, as conceived of by Maddi (1998), is a psychosocial construct which is rooted
in spirituality because it affirms one’s connection with their right to being. In the following subsection I will show how the narratives collected strengthen and expand upon hardiness. (The construct was first introduced in chapter 2.) I find it fitting to reengage with hardiness at this juncture because it represents a bridge construct between the three macro-topics of this dissertation – being, meaning, and spirituality. Thus, hardiness ties together the preceding major themes that I have discussed.

Revisiting Hardiness

Maddi, Brow, Khoshaba, & Vaitkus (2006) discussed how hardiness is ultimately a function of spirituality because through meaning assertion, it involves an attempt to bring order to chaotic universe and can result in personal transcendence. Hardiness as a spiritual function is also connected with the theme of *Willful versus Willing Approach to Creating Meaning*, presented in chapter 6. According to May (1982) we must choose between self-mastery (willfulness) and mystery (willingness) in each decision we face. This is similar to the concept of “choosing the past” or “choosing the future discussed” above in chapter 2. Willfulness can be equated to “choosing the past” as it makes a statement that the individual can maintain his current life trajectory. Willingness can be equated to “choosing the future” as it makes a statement that the individual is open to experiencing the unknown.

Hardiness in the language of spirituality might be seen as the strength and trust of the person’s spirit to surrender to mystery. According to May (1982), willfully “choosing the past” might maintain one’s effectiveness in the world, but it does nothing to answer life’s existential questions of meaning and purpose. This connection of hardiness with willfulness seems to capture Yarran perfectly, as he is well adjusted though not engaged
in deeper levels of meaning. I understand Edward’s story as also exemplifying “choosing the past.” Both of them told life stories which were consistent; without as of yet, any major shifts or reinventions. While Edward’s narrative had tones of ontological guilt, Yarran seemed quite fine with a steady life path based on stagnant frames of meaning. He might be an expert on coping with or ignoring the question of, what if?

The narratives of Annie and Kate provide examples of “choosing the future.” They both chose to jump into the unknown and create radical shifts in their life narrative. The result of choosing the future is a feeling of ontological anxiety, which is defined as the feeling of jumping into the unknown. In their narratives, the two women make decisions that send them off in new life directions; Annie jumps into a life of faith and sober living, and Kate, to being a single mother with her own business. Ontological anxiety was present in both of their stories.

Annie’s interview serves as a good example for how one can express the hardiness sub-constructs of commitment, control, and challenge through his or her stories. Investigating Annie’s life accounts in this way is relevant here because I understand hardiness as a psycho-social-spiritual, resilience construct, which protects an individual’s sense of being, through asserting meaning through being. I will show through looking at Annie’s stories how meaning through being can serve as a foundation for the hardiness construct, thereby adding further theoretical understanding to meaning through being as a resilience factor.

Annie: From Beauty Queen to Queen of Recovery

Commitment. The first ingredient of hardiness is a sense of commitment in one’s life. Maddi explained commitment as a having a sense of acceptance for oneself within
one’s social context. As I have discussed in chapter 6, this relates to the concept of asserting one’s being through creation and discovery of meaning. Annie’s early childhood narrative started with a challenge to her being and potentially could have influenced her to establish a negative sense of meaning through being. Annie shared,

I was a very outgoing child, very ambitious. I tried to join everything that I could in school I was captain of the cheerleading team I was majorette and modern dancer but before then I had a grandmother who didn't like dark-skinned people. I was born in Virginia and my family came here when I was 3-months old. My mother and my father were from the southern part of Virginia and my grandmother was Cherokee Indian mixed with white, so she was raised in those days where lighter-skinned African Americans had better opportunities than darker-skinned African Americans. And um … my dad was dark so I’m the only one in my family who's dark, and my grandmother didn't like my father so therefore she didn't like me. So she was very, very verbally abusive you know she used to make me feel like that, um, she'd tell me that the only thing dark-skinned people could do was clean people houses and babysit … She would wake me up in the morning. Make me help her clean up her house. She died when I was six years old.

Annie set the stage for a very tragic life story and it would be fair to hypothesize that the emotional abuse that she experienced by her grandmother was a root cause of her drug abuse later in her life. What did not happen though, was that Annie’s being did not get completely shattered and she was able to maintain a sense of dignity in who she was. Annie continued,

And I remember that so vividly, because it kind of like drove me to excel in school you know to try to be a lot better things than what she told me I wasn't gonna be. So in a way it kind of hurt but it helped in a way too 'cuz I kept trying to prove her wrong that dark-skinned people weren't just cut out for what she said I was cut out for.

The continuation of her narrative of abuse is a demonstration of her commitment to herself as a dignified human with great potential. I understand Annie’s account as her finding meaning in her experience of being put down by fighting against the pressure to be negated by her grandmother’s prejudices. Thus, Annie found a positive sense of
meaning through being which enabled her to affirm her being in a positive way. Her follow-up meaning story further exemplifies her commitment to self-preservation and acceptance.

A real good time in my life when I was in the 6th grade. We were running for a pageant and it was all based on how many raffle tickets you could sell to get the title of the queen of the school <chuckle>. And then one time I went into my neighborhood and I sold all these tickets. And I captured the title of Miss S. Elementary … And we were competing with girls who were in elementary, junior high, and high school. I was scared to death and my talent for the talent show I modeled and I came in third place.

The above story exemplifies how at a young age Annie did not give in to self-doubt and negative sense of meaning for how she saw herself. Annie was able to accept her black skin as something to be proud of and her experience of winning the “beauty” competition has stayed with her, or, has given her sustained meaning, that she is worthy of self-acceptance. When I followed-up to ask about the particular meaning that this story has for her, Annie responded,

That I was able to accomplish something, that I was recognized as an individual, that my dark skin did shine through. People saw me for my beauty and my little talents that I had at the age of 11 and at least I came in one place out of all those kids ‘cuz it looked like a hundred and fifty of us who competed. So it really made me feel good.

Annie’s phrase, “I was recognized as an individual, that my dark skin did shine through,” demonstrated that the meaning that she draws from her sense of being is a message of self-acceptance, or as Maddi posits, commitment. I would conjecture that this quality of commitment, as a sub-factor of hardiness, most likely aided Annie to overcome her life challenges of homelessness and addiction.

Control. According to Maddi control is a sense that an individual can accomplish the goals that they set out to accomplish. In a way, this hardiness criterion connects
mostly with the concept of meaning through doing which emphasizes the way individuals discover and create meaning through persistent goal-orientation. The story presented below which demonstrates the presence of control in Annie’s life also shows how meaning through doing can assert a positive sense of meaning through being. Annie shared the following narrative from her teenage years.

In the curiosity trauma stage I was a troubled teen. By the time I graduated from junior high school I had started making bad decisions by hanging out with the wrong crowd. My mom wouldn't let me go to the high school where all of my junior high friends went. So I ended up acting out at every high school where I would get transferred to or get kicked out. ‘Cuz during that time PCP was famous, back in the 80’s, which is coming famous again now, and um … when I smoked PCP I would be this different person.

But what really, really caught my attention – All of my friends were getting ready to graduate and I kept saying to myself, “I am not staying back with the stupid.” So I found a school called [Name of] Acadamy which is in D.C., a school for adults and youth who've had trouble in the D.C. public school system. I had made my mind up, “I'm going to graduate with my class.” I went. I took the entrance exam. They put me in my right grade. And six months later I walked across the stage and got my high school diploma with my class.

Annie explained how she got into trouble at school as a way of acting out against her parents. The drug use came along with the bad behavior at that time and setting of Annie’s adolescent years. The narration ends with a strong sense of meaning through doing and a clear presence of what Maddi calls, control. She set out to graduate high school with her friends and that is exactly what she did. When Annie reflected on the meaning of the story for herself today, she touches on the meaning through being she draws from that experience and it shows how the factor of control becomes a meaning-based resilience factor that is grounded in Annie’s being.

The meaning of it was that I was determined. You know, I felt good that I did graduate with my class. From there I had other life plans but the meaning of it was I did something and I stuck to it and I accomplished it.

The dimension of control was expressed in the phrase, “I did something and I stuck to it
“and I accomplished it.” Annie showed that she internalized the meaning that she received from accomplishing her goals by stating, “I was determined.” This becomes a quality that Annie is able to keep with her as she moves forward to other experiences. Her declaration of a positive meaning through being implies that she saw herself as a determined person and thus sees herself as worthy of stating I-AM. Her ability to affirm a right to being also was a probable factor in her ability to overcome her drug addiction. In the above story her ability for control, as the ability for goal pursuit and accomplishment, demonstrated how she prioritized healthy choices over addictive behavior. Thus her ability to exert control helped her to fortify her sense of a positive meaning through being.

As a quick aside, I feel it pertinent to point out how the language of control, as in controlling one’s life, might be a potential conflict for people in recovery. As the popular Twelve Step Recovery Program emphasizes that the first step to recovery is an acceptance that, “we admitted we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1952, p.21). In other words, an addict is asked to accept the fact that they can no longer control their lives and are urged to give up the driver’s seat for a while. As a result of this foundational caveat to the recovery process it should be made explicit that control in terms of hardiness is not suggesting that a person has a sense that they are in complete control, or need to maintain control of their life direction. As I have argued in chapter 6, in the Willfulness versus Willingness theme, letting go of control is crucial for a fuller experience of meaning. Rather control, used by Maddi, suggests that an individual believes in their ability to achieve. Thus, perhaps a better word to use when working with people in recovery is achievability or as Baumeister (1991) identified as a need of meaning, efficacy.
Challenge. It was little harder to find a story that demonstrated how Annie viewed change as exciting or interesting rather than chaotic. I believe that her story in general evidences this point, as she had to make a huge life change to transition from a homeless addict to a successful counselor and homeowner. The story below is about how Annie caught wind of a treatment program and how she reacted to the possibility of finally changing her life for the better. I think it serves well enough as an example of how Annie approaches a challenge.

And it was my second time in detox, but that particular time it was something different. People were coming in from other places sharing their stories and, it's like a light bulb kind of like went on, and I was like, “wow! maybe I should go to treatment,” you know, people talking about how they left detox to go to treatment. And I asked one of the nurses. I was like, you know, “I'm homeless. I really don't have anywhere to go,” and that was one of the motivating factors too. And when I left detox, where was I gonna go? My sister had my kid. And she was willing to watch him until I got myself together. The lady told me about this place K.H., which was on the grounds of [Name of] Hospital which was 28 days in-house treatment program and I went.

Well of course four days after being there my disease start talking to me and telling me I didn't need to be there. “Let's go!” And thank G-d I didn't listen to my disease and I rationalized why I needed to be there and I stayed. Went through transition place called S.I. which helped me get my life back together I got my own little room. We weren't considered homeless any more cuz we had a lease, I was working.

In the moment of her story, Annie expressed excitement to embark on a path of life change. She was ready for the challenge and took the steps needed to embrace the change that she knew was necessary for her continued survival. I think this had a profound influence on her sense of meaning through being because her saying yes to treatment was her saying yes to herself as deserving of treatment and capable of being successful in treatment. In that moment, Annie became the strong young dark-skinned girl who walked boldly into a new life vision of herself. Despite what others might have thought or said,
and despite the doubt she herself elicited, Annie tapped into her *meaning through being* as beauty queen and was able to engage in a path of change.

Four months later I got my kids back. I went to a place where they accepted women and kids. I stayed at this program through C.C. called [Program Name], real good program. They also found me … you get your own apartment and for the first six months you put your money in escrow, you don't pay rent. And I had a co-worker, we were in recovery together. And we went to this place called H. to get a house. And she's like, "you should do it!" I was scared to death. I was like, "who would give me a house?" And I held on to the application for like three months and I finally filled it out and in my third year clean I became a homeowner. And I was the first person from the [Name of] Program who went from a resident to homeownership instead of going from a resident to section 8. So they put an article in the community newspaper about me. And I kinda like opened the door for a lot of other girls because women who were behind me they were doing the same thing … They were becoming home owners for the first time.

Annie shared how she managed to face her fear of taking another step towards a lasting changed life. She showed that she can skillfully engage in challenges and transcend an experience of chaos and uncertainty. Annie showed that she had learned the final ingredient for hardiness, *challenge*. In the story above *challenge* is expressed in her ability to tap into a positive sense of *meaning through being* which asserts her capability and worthiness to take the leap into the unknown.

*Conclusion.* Throughout their narratives Annie, as was demonstrated, and Kate and Yarran similarly, shared stories where they struggled with and demonstrated the three resiliency traits that compose hardiness – commitment, control, and challenge. Since hardiness is a quantitative construct, I can only speculate about its presence through qualitative data. Still, their stories appear to support hardiness as a construct that protects against existential crisis. The mode of protection can be seen as spiritual because, like classic spirituality in a religious sense, an individual implementing hardiness can
organize a terrifyingly random existence and can gain access to moments of personal transcendence.

The current study sheds new light on hardiness as it can be seen, from the participants’ stories, that hardiness ensures that an individual’s essential being is intact and affirmed while one’s meaning through being is attacked by ontological guilt or anxiety. Hardiness may be seen as a spiritual space holder, which is being-based, for when personal meaning is in a state of conflict. This idea of hardiness as a resilience trait which buffers against existential conflict creates a fitting bridge to share the final theme that I constructed from constant comparison of the narratives. The fifth theme is entitled, Meaning through the Facets of Meaningless in Narratives, and it explores the variety of ways in which the participants approached the question about meaning struggle, or came to share naturally about a challenge in their personal meaning system. A main conclusion of the final theme is that individual can assert meaning through an exploration of meaninglessness.

Theme 5: Meaning through the Facets of Meaningless in Narratives

Pastoral counseling offers a unique way in which to interpret the struggle of meaninglessness. O’Conner (2002) wrote about the phenomenon known as the dark night of the soul in which a sense of meaning grows dim due to spiritual distance or disconnection. Given that meaninglessness is interpreted as a spiritual ailment, and religion its cure, I asked individuals to share stories about meaninglessness. At the outset of this project, I expected meaning through being to be more readily tapped when individuals shared about a struggle for meaning in which they were stripped of the elements that they regularly relied upon for meaning.
Throughout the narrative interviews, I experienced that participants showed the most difficulty in answering the question that was directly about meaninglessness. If a participant did not touch naturally on the subject of meaning struggle or a time in which they might characterize as having no meaning, I made sure to ask that individual to share a story which exemplified a time in their life when they lacked meaning or struggled with meaning. It was left up to the participants to decide what that meant for them and their personal narrative. As I asked the question and saw the participants’ reactions of blank stares or asking to repeat the question, I noticed that trying to engage the topic of meaninglessness directly was confusing.

You might ask, in a paper about the experience of raw ever-present meaning, why explore meaninglessness? A state of absence of meaning would seem to contradict the whole premise of this study. I would argue that though I have shown above that there is a facet of meaning that is connected to being which is never absent, there is still an experiential state of lacking meaning. Furthermore, as will be explored below, the state of no meaning is perhaps more accurately a state of disconnection from meaning through being, and as a result of an unawareness of one’s being.

In certain cases participants did not know what to do with the question about lacking meaning. Aria had an interesting response to the direct question about meaninglessness, as seen in the following excerpt from her interview.

Interviewer: So is there a time in your life when you remember specifically lacking meaning?

Aria: No. That’s my initial response, but I can … [Long pause].

My initial question evoked an immediate intuitive response from Aria, “No.” She answered automatically without thinking. After her primary response though, Aria
appeared to doubt the complete truth of her answer and began to think more thoughtfully about the question. In the moment, I felt she was not sure what I wanted from her – that asking about meaninglessness in such a way, “lacking meaning,” was not the correct language to engage the topic. Aria may not dwell in a cognitive way on her meaning struggles; she does not sit and think, oh I am now having a lack of meaning. I tried to ask the question in a different way, from a more emotional-based experience of meaninglessness,

Interviewer: That’s fine. What I’m trying to get at is if there’s a moment where you maybe had some kind of turnaround for yourself, a pickup for yourself, that you got yourself out of a tough inner funk or something like that.

Aria: I’m trying to think. There would probably be something in college. Could you ask me one more time?

Interviewer: Could you describe a time where you felt a lack of meaning, and whether it resolved, and how?

My attempt to clarify the question was rejected and Aria actually wanted to think about an experience of lacking meaning. In her response to me repeating the question, Aria revealed how her meaning through being impacts her experience of herself in the world.

A lack of meaning or struggle with meaning … Lack of meaning was never an issue for me. I don’t think that’s what you mean by that, [Talking more to herself] but um, a struggle with meaning. I’ll give this a whirl.

The primary purpose … I had in college—she called it survivor’s guilt. When I was very successful … What exactly was it? The guilt, not sure of the meaning of it, and recently, lucky breaks. It seems like in my life … jumping ahead. So many things just come together for me. I learned a lot in college, came in with very specific goals, and for me personally, I found that completely letting go of that, and having an overall intention, and leaving space for things to come to me, and things would just come to me. It would happen very natural. And it blows my mother away every time.

I pack later than I should, I find an amazing apartment in [city name], way within my price range, $750 a month on C. Street—whatever. These things, within two weeks, things just come together for me. I met this guy just recently,
and I really like this guy. It was a month ago. I was like "I want to date.", and things just come together… A lack of meaning, or confusion about something meant, is – well, guilt, I feel, and not understanding—

I’ve come to see for whatever reason for me, my father’s lesson in his life, survival and strength and perseverance, he’s lost so many things in his life, over and over again, like, as one of our therapists said once, he really should be dead by now. Like scientifically, theoretically, spiritually, he really should be dead. It’s amazing. Really, over 5 times. It’s mindboggling. And I’ve sort of come to terms with that, kind of, but here I am, making $36,000 a year, making much more than the four plus person families I worked with throughout college, proportional to their salaries or their needs, making more than my parents to some extent, they’re both disabled, they both work so hard, people don’t even know that, you know, but.

And what is the meaning of that? In some ways for whatever reason, I got all the lucky breaks that they didn’t. Granted, I worked very hard, but so many people work hard. So many people work hard their whole lives. And if I had challenges I’d rise to them, but things just come to me right now. And I’m very fortunate, but there’s guilt and confusion I feel about that, knowing how hard my parents worked.

As she began to share Aria defined what meaninglessness means to her. She does not consider meaninglessness as lacking meaning, rather as a lack of coherence. As she contemplated struggle with meaning, Aria brought to the forefront of her mind the fact that part of her does not feel worthy of what she has accomplished. She expressed feeling guilty for overcoming life challenges of discrimination to her family and to her own self.

An undercurrent theme to her story that I read is a simultaneous opening to gratitude and wonder in her life narrative. Aria accidentally discovers meaning by attempting to pinpoint an experiential lack of meaning.

By answering the question, she brings coherence to her parents and her own story – highlighting the social advancement of her family. The sense of coherence reveals that the suffering of her family was not for nothing. She embraces into her being the sense that she is part of a lineage of hard-working and striving people. The guilt that Aria experienced seems to come from her wondering if she has worked hard enough for the
gifts that she has received in her life. This might be a foundational question that Aria will continue to struggle with and it is a question that is connected to her experience of meaning thorough being. Another way of phrasing her deliberation is, Am I worthy or not? Self-worth is one of the four needs of meaning (Baumeister, 1991). Her struggle to maintain a sense of meaning is rooted in wanting to experience herself as dignified. This idea follows from Aria’s participant summary presented in chapter 4, which provided some detail to how her family’s dignity had been threatened on numerous occasions. Thus, Aria finds meaning in her exploration of lacking meaning – her meaning narrative is about her struggles to discover and create meaning by affirming a being that is characterized by dignity. Annie, in contrast to Aria, expounded more organically about a sense of meaning struggle in her life story.

She shared about her mother’s death and how she was out using drugs instead of caring for her mother.

Annie: From her … from my mom's experience… See my mother was the type she would never go to the hospital she would never get yearly check-ups. So her experience taught me how to take better care of myself, you know, get physicals annually even when you aren’t feeling sick and actually it's made me like a hypochondriac, because if I get a cold or something like that I run to the hospital. But um I just wish I would have been there for her.

Interviewer: Yeah. And is there ... the meaning of that time period for you now? I mean you touched on it a little bit.

Annie: It was dull. It was dark. Was like a lost place …

Her answer caught me a little off guard. I had expected an answer that explained what she might have learned from that time period. Instead Annie used metaphoric words which to me spoke of emptiness and void. In order to confirm if Annie’s metaphorical description could fit into an interpretation of meaninglessness, I asked her,
Interviewer: *That was a time without meaning?*

Annie: Yeah. There was no meaning during that time.

Annie’s story of meaninglessness allows me to speculate about a central aspect of meaning for her. As mentioned in her participant summary Annie seems to experience meaning by accomplishing goals that not only she, but that her mother, would be proud of. This account of not being there for her mother, while she was sick and dying, has stained Annie’s sense of meaning through being. Her self-perception of her behavior has left a black whole which has become an important part of Annie’s total meaning narrative. She can only find peace in her sense of being, and affirm meaning of her past as an addict by proving to herself (and her mother) that she has indeed changed. For this reason it can be proposed that essential to Annie’s sense of meaning is a sustained focus on repentance. For Annie, her experience of meaninglessness gives meaning to her life as a recovering addict.

Another learning from Annie’s reflection about meaninglessness is how individuals use metaphor to talk about the experience of challenge to meaning. Again, as meaning is a crucial phenomenon to an assertion of being, it would make sense that talking about the lack of meaning would be difficult. Annie described her struggle as a, “dull,” “dark,” and a “lost place.” Similarly, Evan responded to the question of meaninglessness with a metaphor which expressed a challenge to meaning. He told the following story about a time when he had a religious struggle to either increase his traditional observance or to stick with his own personal path in Judaism.

There was sort of a hollowness, you feel there’s some type of hunger or something that’s aggravating inside that feels unresolved and it’s unsure of what will satiate it, its like, you know that there is something that I needed in my life that I was not bringing to it.
And J.’s answer was religious structure. And to me that did not have meaning at the time. And we had an in-depth conversation at the time about the reasons for that and he had already found meaning in that. But for me, one of the reasons for doing it could have been, we were trying to toss around the time, was doing religious ritual. For the idea of when meaning comes you’ll have a vessel to put it into, not necessarily that it will be imbued with meaning in the beginning, that is a lot of pressure to put on a ritual, but the idea that certain times you will need a space-time to express that and have that structure … I don't do that currently.

So the lack of meaning … is partially a lack of direction a lack of feeling like, there is a self indulgence of not contributing, not working, not contributing on a daily basis of teaching or doing you know, quote un quote, “meaningful work,” so I wasn’t involved in that at the time and so I feel that in part is also the lack of meaning.

I see Evan’s answer as having three parts. The first piece is his metaphoric, emotion-based transmission of his experience of meaninglessness. The second part is a story which provided a specific example of a time when the metaphor was alive for him. The third segment is his cognitive conclusion, based on parts 1 and 2, of what the experience of meaninglessness means for him. Evan expressed his experience of meaninglessness as, “hollowness,” “a hunger,” and an unresolved aggravation. His emotion-based description of meaning struggle likens to Annie’s metaphoric language which was suggestive of emptiness. Evan had an experience of his life as empty; something was missing from his life that he could not easily pinpoint.

He next related a story in which he receives a suggestion which might fill that emptiness for him. His friend suggested that he take on more religious ritual into his daily life. While Evan described himself as rejecting conformity (See his character summary.), he entertained the idea because he functions under the belief that ritual creates room for meaning in one’s life. The following point is what I interpret Evan is trying to stress – the felt hollowness and emptiness is the feeling of the void of meaning. With his understanding that meaning was missing he offers a cognitive summary of how he was
lacking in meaning. For Evan, at that time, he felt lacking in meaning because he perceived himself as not contributing enough to sharing with the world that which he loved to be engaged in. In the parlance of this study, Evan was engaged in a lot of doing, but not meaningful doing. He was not allowing his sense of *meaning through being* to guide his actions where he would experience *meaning through doing*. With the following awareness, Evan was en route to resolve his meaning conflict by creating more meaningfully-informed experiences in his life, such as moving to a more naturally integrated setting.

**Conclusion for Facets of Meaningless Theme**

The exploration of meaninglessness throughout the different narratives was laced with both strong negative emotions and gripping metaphors. Participants spoke about loneliness, aggravation, and depression. They shared about feeling lost and hopeless. The explorations demonstrated how meaninglessness can be a difficult topic to approach head-on and perhaps there are other creative ways, not utilized in this study, to explore meaninglessness more concretely. Similarly to how the language of the sacred was expanded to include both the psychological and spiritual (See Theme 4 above.), indeed meaninglessness can be understood as a struggle with various psycho-spiritual constructs, such as hope, worthiness, and connection.

I demonstrated how an exploration of meaninglessness can initiate an assertion of meaning during a meaning struggle. Exploring a lack of meaning through narratives appears to facilitate a telling of a pivotal story that explores deeply how *meaning through being* can be reasserted (as seen in Annie’s example), potentially by rectifying an absence of coherence (as seen in Aria’s story). An absence of coherence can serve as a motivator
to live a being-affirming life because the individual is aware of how the opposite sense – a sense of emptiness – degrades one’s sense of being, and thus their access to meaning through being.

Chapter VII Conclusion

In the current chapter I investigated the following question: *How does one’s personal connection to religion/spirituality impact their sense of meaning from interacting with the world in a focused process of creation and/or a reflexive process of discovery?* I approached this question in multiple ways, beginning with an exploration of the use of God to affirm one’s being and thus provide meaning through being. In the stories it appeared that meaning from God followed from a relationship with a God that accepted one’s total identity, including the parts of oneself that might be self-perceived as negative, or unacceptable in a cultural sense. I saw the parallel between God acceptance and self-acceptance as a key ingredient to experience a sense of assertion of meaning through being.

Through the theme of *Encountering and Expanding the Sacred* I supported the argument that the idea of a spiritual connection with meaning can be broadened beyond religious and spiritual language. Both religious and secular stories were presented as being sacred because they each centered on a personally meaningful object which caused an experience of immersion and psychological or spiritual transcendence. I explored through my own sacred encounter how an individual can experience a clearer understanding of their world by coming across a person who is simply being who they are.

The study’s results have confirmed and elucidated the concept of hardiness
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(Maddi, 1998) as a resilience quality which protects the individual’s being during a time of meaning struggle. Hardiness served to connect the major constructs of this dissertation – being, meaning, and spirituality. Finally, I explored the varied experience of meaning struggle that was reported by the participants. It was fitting to look at Facets of Meaninglessness because meaninglessness is a psycho-spiritual crisis from which hardiness protects against. As it turned out, contemplation on lack of meaning appeared to facilitate potential understanding of an essential meaning component of the participant’s perceived being. This point reemphasizes the discussion above on ramifications for counseling (Chapter 5), as it provides further proof of the benefit of exploring meaning through being with clients in meaning struggles.
CHAPTER VIII

Final Discussion

This study was about the phenomenological experience of meaning that is expressed through the narratives of individuals. I began the study with three research questions which after encountering the stories were changed in order to reflect my interpretation of the narratives in light of meaning theory. The questions investigated in chapters 5 – 7 are:

1. *What are the dynamics of the raw experience of meaning that seems to exist in the words of meaning theorists (meaning through being)?*

2. *How might creation of meaning and discovery of meaning play out as distinct processes in the stories of individuals?*

3. *How does one’s personal connection to religion/spirituality impact their sense of meaning from interacting with the world in a focused process of creation and/or a reflexive process of discovery?*

I conducted a narrative inquiry because it allowed me to interpret meaningful stories through specific theoretical lenses while staying open to trends that I attended to in the reading of the narrative transcripts. In short, I was interested in finding out more about the relationship between being, meaning, and spirituality. This study has implications for Pastoral Counseling, both in its method and content. The use of stories as data connects with the heart of Pastoral work. I was awed by each individual that sat in front of me and shared their life experiences. As shall be seen at this chapter’s conclusion, I generated multiple questions which may serve to further enrich the budding field of Pastoral Counseling. In content, this study dealt with one of the most fundamental
human questions, where does one draw their worth and dignity from? As Pastoral Counselors we help clients attend to this basic life query by providing them a space, through presence, to search their being and explore.

I contextualized the results and discussion by providing participant summaries and categorizing the types of stories that they told. The answers to the research questions were presented most concretely in five major themes: (1) Being, Doing, and Integration, (2) Discovery of meaning leads to creation of meaning, (3) Willful versus Willing approach to creating meaning, (4) Exploring and expanding the sacred, and (5) Facets of Meaninglessness. The major themes allowed me to confirm, expand, and argue with the variety of meaning theory that I presented in chapter 2.

Theme 1 focused on the first research question in chapter 5. Analysis of the stories in chapter 5 focused on distinguishing meaning that is rooted in the being of the individual (raw experience of meaning) and meaning that is expressed through the goal-setting and accomplishments of the individual (doing). I concluded that meaning stories do indeed demonstrate meaning through being and meaning through doing as two distinct access points to personal meaning. I also demonstrated, through the narratives told, that an experience of meaning is ultimately rooted in the I-AM experience of being and the connection to one’s being means that meaning is always available.

Themes 2 and 3 addressed the second question in chapter 6. The interpretation of the stories in chapter 6 looked at how individuals assert personal meaning through narratives unexpectedly as they encounter their world (discovery), or consciously by directly manipulating their environment (creation). I concluded that discovery of meaning and creation of meaning are in fact distinct processes, though discovery of meaning must
have had taken place prior to *creation of meaning*. In order to speak about meaning in a way that acknowledges *meaning through being*, I suggested that instead of referring to the ceaseless integration of situational meaning into global meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997) as “searching for meaning,” theorists should adopt the terms *assertion, affirmation,* or *confirmation of meaning*. The latter terms keep in focus the powerful experience of being that exists throughout one’s life at the core of personal meaning. The chapter also presented an in-depth look at *creation of meaning* by examining the spectrum of willing to willful approaches to creating meaning.

In Chapter 7, the third research question was addressed primarily through examining how people spoke about God in their meaning frameworks and through the theme of *Encountering and Expanding the Sacred*. I demonstrated how the sacred experience can be framed in broader language than purely spiritual and religious language. I used the narratives to show how asserting *meaning through being* is at the core of the sacred experience. The theme helped me to expand upon the theory behind the psycho-social-spiritual-based construct of hardiness (Maddi, 1998). I presented this developmental resiliency concept as a conglomerate of components which stands in for a sense of meaning while assertion of meaning has yet to take place. The chapter concluded with an exploration of the *Facets of Meaninglessness* as seen in the narratives, as meaninglessness can be seen a malady that affects the existential elements of being, meaning and spirituality. The stories were used to show the value of exploring meaninglessness as a path towards the assertion of meaning.

**Interaction of the Major Themes**

I conceive of the five major themes as relating to each other in a proposed model
presented in the figure below.

![Circular diagram of themes]

Figure. Interaction of the five major themes. The five major themes that were constructed from the narratives can be conceptualized in a theoretical model, whereby the central process of meaning integration is facilitated by creation and discovery of meaning all within the context of being.

The figure represents the process of meaning affirmation as occurring in a well-adjusted individual raised in Western society. As shown in the figure, there is a central process of meaning through being and meaning through doing integration that is always taking place. The cycle takes place within the experience of being and cannot be separated out from the individual’s I-AM experience (Theme 1). I understand integration as taking place through a process affirmation of meaning, as referred to by May (1983). The process of affirming, asserting, or confirming one’s being with focused intent is creation of meaning (Theme 2). This process may be characterized along a spectrum of willingness to willfulness (Theme 3). Discovery of meaning emphasizes the connection
with being by reminding an individual what is essentially meaningful to him or her
(meaning through being) (Theme 2). Sacred encounters are one way of discovering
meaning and they include the elements of immersion and transcendence (Theme 4). The
final theme of meaninglessness is seen when there is a break in the meaning through
being and meaning through doing integration flow (Theme 5). A person may have a clear
sense of purpose though cannot find a way to manifest meaningful experiences. On the
other hand, a person might be very active, though have a sense that they are acting in a
void without an internal connection to what they are engaged. The state of
meaninglessness is experientially varied and can lead a person to reengage with their
meaning integration process. The model above has ramifications for counseling as it
provides insight for therapists to facilitate meaning assertion for clients as they share
experiences from their lives.

Limitations and Considerations for Future Study

In chapter 4, I examined the demographic breakdown of the participants. Tables 1
and 2 provide a summary of that information and focus on participant age, gender, sexual
orientation, occupation, race/ethnicity and religious/spiritual identity. Given that the
participants were living in the metro Washington DC area, I was limited to the
demographics of that region. Also the participant group size, kept at 12 for
manageability’s sake, also curtailed a full spectrum of diversity. Thus, the participants
were mainly Jewish or Christian, of some denomination, and for the majority they were
Caucasian or African American. I think gender and sexual orientation were fairly
represented, though it would have been interesting to have more transgender people
involved. The careers of the participants were weighted heavily on the social services
side and I believe that this impacted how they told their stories and the content of their stories, as they probably made assumptions as to what I was looking for, or what would be “good material” for a study about meaning. I think it is fair to assume that they were trying to be “good clients.”

As this was a study about meaning and not about the meaning of a particular group, having a diverse group of participants was crucial. It is important to note who was not represented in the group of people interviewed, as different kinds of people would have shared different stories, and thus are perhaps asserting meaning in different ways. Therefore, in the future, this study could be expanded upon by interviewing people who grew up in a different culture than American culture. In the language of Daniel Quinn (1995; 1996; 2002; 2006), the whispers of Mother Culture might be different for non-Americans. Future participant groups might be more representative of non-White and non-African American races, including people from Hispanic and Asian descent. I am, however, led to speculate that a broader range of religious affiliation would have yielded different perspectives on personal meaning. Additionally, different types of stories might have been told by blue collar workers.

Another limitation of the study is that the participants told the stories to me specifically. How they perceived me probably impacted the stories that they told and I suspect that people may not have felt comfortable speaking about negative personal meaning. I present myself as a religious Jew who is studying in a Pastoral Counseling program. This might have led people to share or withhold certain religious beliefs or spiritual-based stories. Louis openly struggled with sharing his conversion story, fearing that I would judge him. I tried to counter my personal impact on the participants by
reassuring participants that I was attending to them with non-judgmental acceptance. This approach is a similar type of attunement that I practice with my therapy clients to build rapport.

I remind the reader at this point that the nature of this study was an exploratory study in order to generate hypotheses based on the interpretations of the data collected. Therefore, I offered suggestions throughout the discussion of the results how approaching meaning in a fuller context can be beneficial to mental health. Research building on the current study might include empirical and/or qualitative methods.

In light of the participants that were included in the study, I think a worthwhile narrative inquiry would be to look at the meaning of people who are marginalized in their cultural sphere. For example, the current study raised interesting questions as the stories of Daryl and Yarran (African American men), Annie (recovering addict), and Lee (transgender female-to-male) were analyzed. Future questions connected to those populations might be: (1) How does the experience of an African American male growing up in popular American culture effect their beliefs about the ability to assert personal meaning throughout their lives? (2) How might an awareness of meaning through being aid a recovering addict in connecting with a perspective of being that is valued and has meaning? (3) What are the specific ramifications suffered by transgendered people in their personal meaning assertion as they encounter a binary gendered world? And, how might meaning affirmation in the non-transgendered culture be expanded by people encountering transgendered people? An underlying thread of all the above questions, and a connection to the current study, is that meaning assertion is a human right and no one should grow up feeling barred from accessing an authentic path
to personal meaning. In some cases the perspective of the individual needs to shift, though in other cases the cultural norm needs to be held accountable.

Another point of expansion on this study is to examine the development of meaning through being awareness in connection with a human development theory, such as Maslow’s (1943) theory of human motivation. How might the presence or absence of meaning through being assist or hinder the obtainment of the individual’s need for physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization satisfaction? Such a study may reveal even deeper dynamics of meaning through various life challenges and triumphs.

For further quantitative or mix-method analysis I offer the following topics for investigation:

1. An awareness of meaning, as connected with who one is (meaning through being), adds to a perception of mental health, more so, than an awareness of meaning, as connected to accomplishments (meaning through doing), alone. People can form identity labels based on personal meaning integration (power labels).

2. Individuals experience meaningful elements of the world as if they had always been meaningful to them. They can assert what is inherently meaningful to them by accidently exposing what is meaningful to them (discovery), or by purposefully manipulating their environment (creation). Mystery can be what makes an encounter meaningful.

3. Openness to change and goal directedness can be blended along a binary spectrum with presence of purpose in life appearing when openness to change is also present. Another way to look at this assumption is through the relationship between
purpose and life and locus of control, where externalizing locus of control might result in more consistent presence of personal meaning.

4. As individuals evolve in ego development they are better able to assert personal meaning in the face of cultural challenges to personal meaning. The presence of hardiness can stand in for measures of spirituality to explain stable well being when personal meaning is frustrated.

5. Individuals can experience a psychological transcendence that is similar to spiritual transcendence in all elements except that psychological transcendence does not have to be trans-rational. Both spiritual and psychological transcendence contributes to a sustained sense of personal meaning. God can provide an access point to meaning when the individual perceives God as providing unconditional acceptance of one’s being.

6. A sense of meaninglessness may be experienced when meaning integration (being and doing) does not occur through the flow of discovery of meaning to creation of meaning. Exploring meaninglessness can be an intervention for the experience of meaning. Individuals can learn to make meaning out meaninglessness and this can contribute to a sustained sense of purpose in life.

The above list of future research directions touches on topics that relate to counselor education, psychology and/or pastoral counseling. The assertions above may involve career and identity development, clinical interventions, meaning theory, social justice, human development, and religious and spiritual issues in health and well-being. From a quality standpoint, I added valuable knowledge to the above mentioned themes. This knowledge was sharpened by participant, peer, and committee review.
Through the stories collected, I showed that meaning is more primal than simply what we do. The ways by which people affirm meaning is very diverse and at the core is a recommitment to living with awareness of being. At times individuals may face a meaning conflict with culture values. Such struggles can point to a need for the individual to practice the skillfulness of navigating personal meaning in spite of culture. Additionally, cultural rules may be called into question. For example, individuals interviewed seem to challenge the correctness of a binary gender system and the access to fulfillment that is based on economic status. Spirituality based on a divine being, in a religious sense, or core human being, in a philosophical sense, can equally provide a person with an access point to sustainable meaning.
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personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research. (pp. 259 – 274)


APPENDIX

Complete List of 80 Nodes Used to Code the Narratives