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THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE GOD REPRESENTATION 
IN WOMEN

by

Herdley O. Paolini

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THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE GOD REPRESENTATION IN WOMEN

Herdley O. Paolini, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2001

The purpose of this research was to identify and describe common themes present in the constructions and functions of the God representation in women. In particular, this research explored the common themes and relationships between a woman's internal representation of God and her use of that representation in the service of creating and recreating the self.

Although God representation has received some attention in the literature, most research has focused on God representation formation, not function. In addition, much literature examining God representation has focused on psychiatric cases; very little has been studied about God representation in the general population and the course of normal development. Several authors have noted the need in particular for research employing qualitative methodology (Horowitz, 1970; MacDargh, 1986; Marcellino, 1996; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Tisdale, Key, Edwards, Brokaw, & Kemperman, 1997).

In the current research, phenomenologically-based qualitative methodology (Moustakas, 1994) was used. Two semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 women who reported an awareness of their God representation and who could engage in conversation about their lives in relation to self, others, and relationships as identified by the women in responding to a written announcement and screening.
interview conducted by the researcher. Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted approximately one and one-half hours each.

The results of the current research revealed that all participants' God representations seem to relate to their early relational experiences. The quality of the participants' experiences with significant others early in their lives was seen in direct relationship to the quality and dynamics of their God representation. Secondly, the participants' God representations seem to relate to providing meanings that support the participants' sense of self. The God representation was seen as supporting and reinforcing the experience of the self as it evolves and develops. Thirdly, the participants' God representations seem to change as changes were experienced in self and other representations. It is hoped that the results of this research can provide a source of information to helping professionals and other interested parties regarding what appears to be a most important object relation: that of a woman and her private God.
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Herdley O. Paolini
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Psychology has long been concerned with self and other representations and how these representations affect the development and maintenance of self and relating in general. It is commonly accepted today that we do have internal representations of others, including representations of God, but psychology seems less comfortable investigating and making use of clients’ God representations in the process of psychotherapy. Perhaps part of this reluctance arises from Freud’s conception that in the process of development one is to give up one’s attachment to a God if one is to achieve emotional maturity (Rizutto, 1974).

Later theorists, including Jung (1952), Fairbairn (1952), Guntrip (1949, 1969), and Winnicott (1971), challenged Freud’s views and suggested that religious experience may be a normal part of development and is subject to health or distortion as development progresses, just as it is true of any human experience. In sharp contrast to Freud, Guntrip (1969) took the issue of God and religious experiences in an opposite direction. He believed religious experiences have integrating potential just as any “fully developed personal relationship.” The above theorists and others (Erikson, 1956; McDargh, 1986; Meissner, 1978; Rizutto, 1974) continually outline the importance of assessing and understanding one’s relationship with God as an integral part of understanding the person and his or her world.
The work of psychiatrist Ana-Maria Rizutto (1974) attempted to describe the unconscious process of forming and relating to the internalized image of God in psychiatric patients. One of her understandings is that one's God representation has the potential for integrating or fragmenting one's overall psychological experience. McDargh (1986) shared similar feelings, believing that "the dynamic of object representation in general and the formation of the object representation of God in particular, is inextricably involved in the processes whereby human beings maintain themselves and develop as selves"(p. 114). He further stated that "whether the God representation is usable for the multiple dimensions of self-becoming depends upon the complex interplay of the many factors which bore its origin and development" (p. 116). Both Rizzuto (1979) and McDargh (1986) believe that an individual's sense of self is affected by the representational traits of an individual's private God, which implies that the representation may be used at the service of the self or as an impediment to it.

It was in clinical practice that the author first became aware of a visible and clear distinction between the ways in which a particular God representation seem to influence the psychological life of the individual. This awareness was seen most clearly among female clients. Why this is the case is unclear. Women's God representations may be more apparent because more women attend church than men and therefore may be more at ease with talking about God. Perhaps women are more aware of their relationship with a God. Or perhaps the therapeutic issues of women clients make the "appearance of God" in their psychological awareness and in therapy a dynamically necessary occurrence. The author has repeatedly observed that in therapy a woman's particular God representation plays a significant part in the therapeutic process. It is possible that the frequency and intensity of this occurrence
has been due to a clinical setting that serves mostly religious clients. In any case, the importance of God representations is seen especially in regard to women’s efforts to maintain personal relationships while claiming their personal integrity and power. The developmental task of balancing inclusiveness with distinctiveness in a relationship is universal and experienced by both men and women. However, the task is particularly challenging for women, who historically have been taught to pursue care and relationships at the cost of the self and who usually have not been active participants in the forming of the rules and the discourse that govern their lives. The developmental mandate for many women, simply put, is to place other before self. A person’s God representations reflect one’s cultural context, especially one’s religious culture. God representations are based on internalizations of relationships and relating, fantasies, social expectations, and, in Western culture, a male God (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; Cole, 1995; Hunt, 1995; McFague, 1988; Saussy, 1991).

Clients frequently articulate in their narratives some of the ways in which their experiences with their God representations have tended to shape other relationships in the same relational pattern. It is clinically apparent that clients need to have and defend a particular kind of God representation which serves crucial psychological functions in relationships. For some clients, both male and female, the internalized God representation has the power to mobilize clients’ energies for personal growth. For other clients, their God representations are related to guilt, shame, and psychological disorganization and are used pervasively against the self.

This research is neither about religion nor theology. It is about object relations, in particular, one object relation: that of a woman with that special object she calls God. For this purpose, this research intends to explore the common themes
and relationships between a woman’s internal representations of God and her use of that representation in the service of creating (i.e., developing who one is) and recreating (i.e., integrating new and old aspects) the self. How might a woman use her God representation in the process of developing who she is? How might she use her God representation in the lifelong task of integrating old and new aspects of herself and the accompanying need to balance togetherness and separateness? The research will address whether particular representations of God have a mediating function for a woman’s sense of goodness or badness. Does a woman’s God representation mediate her view of her own behavior, and might she call on it to be a helpful mediator with self and other issues she faces?

This research will reflect concepts drawn from a number of sources, including the British object relations school with its recognition of the centrality of connectedness in human development, the American school of self psychology, the constructivist developmental theory, and selected feminist theories. The research is meant to be consistent with a model of human nature that makes possible a more open attitude toward religion, particularly God representations in a woman’s psychological life. Within such framework “religion is understood as originating not from the need to ward off the return of the repressed or to gratify infantile wishes but from the necessity for every cohesive and energetic self to exist in a matrix of relationships” (Jones, 1996, p. 41). Rizzuto (1979) wrote that the “sense of self is in fact in dialectical interaction with a God representation that has become essential to the maintenance of the sense of being oneself” (p. 5). A model of human nature that guides us toward the importance of subjective experience, while also seeing a network of external relationships as integral to the self, seems to provide a solid theoretical base for the study of female experience with God representations.
Clinical observations and experience have suggested that as therapy progresses and aspects of the self are owned and reworked, as personal voices and personal authority are accepted and owned, the God representation either shifts naturally or has to be reworked so it supports the change. As Rizzuto (1979) stated, “The God representation changes along with us and our primary objects in the lifelong metamorphosis of becoming ourselves in a context of other relevant beings” (p. 52). MacDargh (1983), in his study of two women, seemed to have encountered a similar clinical experience. He concluded that one cannot maintain a sense of self containing intellectual integrity and independence and continue to relate to certain representations of God and vice versa. Regarding the experience of two women he interviewed, MacDargh stated, “With both women the mitigation of the false self is a matter of faith, the growth of an inner assurance that they can live out of their true selves and not risk being undone” (p. 234).

An object relations view of God representations supports the notion that as the self experiences changes related to more congruency with true self dynamics, one’s object representations, including God representations, would also change. The object relations concept of transitional phenomena is most useful in understanding the inner assurance that may provide the forum for living out of one’s true self. If, for example, a person’s particular God representation can provide the safety to explore and risk, then that person might be able to confront and modify internal dynamics that make it possible for the self to psychologically transition from one self constitution to another. One of Winnicott’s analysands stated this dynamic well when she said, “Some people use God as an analyst—someone to be there while you’re playing” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 5). In such a context, the many sources that provide elements for the formation of particular God representations may be reconsidered and divested of
some of their real and imaginary danger or appeal (Rizzuto, 1979). Based on this
dynamic interplay between transitional phenomena and ability to risk and challenge
internalized aspects of self and others, this research will also address how
psychotherapists might use a particular client’s God representation to help mediate
struggles the client is facing in both internal and external experiencing.

In summary, the purpose of this study is to understand and describe common
themes present in the construction and function of God representations in women. In
particular, this researcher is interested in exploring the common themes and
relationships between a woman’s internal representation of God and her use of that
representation to deal with life issues and the developmental task of claiming her
personal integrity and power while maintaining personal relationships.

Significance of the Study

This study may provide new insights for people in psychological practice and
those who are interested in object relations theory. It contributes to theories related
to the intrapsychic foundation of mental representations of God and to women’s
development. This study will examine the following questions which have not yet
been specifically addressed in the current literature:

1. How does a particular God representation develop in a woman?
2. What difference does it make to a woman to hold to a particular
representation of God?
3. When and how is one’s God representation a positive or detrimental force
in the growth process?

Although God image formation has received quite a bit of attention in the past
10 years, most of the literature relates God representations to parental representations
and experiences. Most studies also tend to focus on image formation, not function. Very few studies deal in particular with the God representations of women and the function they serve in women's overall development. In addition, much of the literature related to religion examines psychiatric cases. Very little is currently known about religious imagery uses among the general population and in the course of normal development. In the researcher's judgment, none of the participants in this research exhibited significant psychopathological difficulties.

The present research will use qualitative methods in the study of God representations. This methodology has been strongly suggested but rarely attempted in investigating this topic (Marcellino, 1996; Tisdale, Key, Edwards, Brokaw, & Kemperman, 1997). The study proposes to bring the needed diverse methodology in the study of God representations into the present literature. "We need both a theory and a research methodology that is adequate to the complexity, mysteriousness, and existential significance of the religious material that we may be privileged to come upon . . ." (McDargh, 1986, p. 2). The exploration of a person's internal meaning-making structure can best be examined by a dialogue with that person about his or her internal symbols and images. Horowitz (1970) adds, "An image is such a private experience that there is only one primary source of information about it: the introspective report" (p. 4).

In the area of academic religion and theology, as well as pastoral psychology, this study may provide further insight into such areas as faith and spiritual development, religious education, and pastoral counseling theory and practice. Both psychology and theology have a role to play in this dialogue. This research is an effort to motivate and continue the psychological end of such dialogue. Such
interdisciplinary dialogue carries the potential of deepening and strengthening both fields.

In the realm of psychotherapy, the recent inclusion of religion as a human difference in the American Psychological Association's (APA) revised “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (1992) and the addition of “Religious or Spiritual Problem” in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV, 1994) suggests that a client's religious history and experience is being recognized as an important part of any client's clinical presentation. Whether or not a therapist believes in its importance, these changes make it the responsibility of practitioners in the field of psychology to be aware of issues related to religion and to acquire an ability to effectively address these issues as they present themselves in treatment. Furthermore, as it relates to psychotherapy, the importance of integrating newly elaborated self-representations with representations of relevant objects, including God, cannot be overstated. Clients' ongoing dialogue with internal representations is a real part of their daily experiences, apparently intensifying at times of changes. How therapists understand and participate in that dialogue and relationally impact the client's change process is of great interest to therapists. Taking into consideration that more females than males are seen in both churches and therapists' offices, the focus on understanding women and the religious imagery they bring with them is not only a professional but an ethical responsibility.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. It is strictly an exploratory study. It is an attempt to reach, record, and describe the God representation experiences of some women, primarily through their verbal, subjective accounts. The study is limited to
the participants' awareness of self, other, and internal processes in general and will be conducted with women who are aware of a God representation and can enter a dialogue about that representation. The findings of this research are based on a small sample of participants and cannot be safely generalized to all women in the manner associated with quantitative methods of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative methods also require the participation of the researcher as the instrument of both data collection and interpretation. Therefore, a commitment to self-awareness and to reflecting upon and reporting potential sources of bias and error is an ethical responsibility of the researcher.

The Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

The researcher obtained the approval of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) at Western Michigan University in order to conduct the present research (see Appendix J). The confidentiality of the participants was ensured by the researcher's use of anonymous identifying references.

Definition of Terms

Object Representation: In this study, object representation refers to a mental representation (i.e., image, idea, fantasy, feeling, or memory) relevant to another person, place, thing, idea, fantasy, or memory (Hamilton, 1990). These conscious and unconscious representations are formed from early interactions with primary caregivers and are a function of both the external characteristics of the other and of the feelings, needs, expectations, and sensations that a person experiences while in relationship to the other (Summers, 1994).
God Representation: In this study, God representation refers to those beliefs, images, and experiences specifically related to one’s perceptions of God. Various authors suggest that the development and maintenance of God representations are dependent upon early childhood experiences of parental figures, particularly the degree to which the child experienced his or her needs to be met (McDargh, 1986; Meissner, 1978, 1984; Rizzuto, 1979). Rizzuto (1979) suggests that God representations are formed from varied sources, including both parental images, images of a wished-for-parent and the feared parent, as well as other important people and experiences in a child’s life.

The type of God each individual produces as a first representation is the compounded image resulting from all these contributing factors—the pre-oedipal psychic situation, the beginning stage of the oedipal complex, the characteristics of parents, the predicaments of the child with each of his (or her) parents and siblings, the general religious, social, and intellectual background of the household. (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 45)

God representations may be unconscious, pre-conscious, or conscious, and they are constructed and reconstructed, referred to or ignored, adored or feared (Schafer, 1968).

Internalization Process: In this study, internalization process refers to the ways a person takes in aspects of their external relational experiences through mental representations, memories, and feelings. From these internalized experiences, meanings about oneself, others, and relating are made, aspects of the self come to be held as good or bad, and the person comes to relate to self, others, and the world, in a particular way (Trembley, 1996).

Transitional Phenomena: In this study, transitional phenomena refer to representational meanings created by the person to help bridge the gap between self
and other when the other is absent or frustrating, between prior notions of self and new ones, and between the security of being merged and the fear of being alone.

It is a part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 2)

Self: The term self as used in this study refers to a set of conscious and unconscious mental representations that pertain to one's own person. It involves the sense of who we are in relation to others and begins in infancy and evolves throughout the life span (Hamilton, 1990).
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter is organized in two sections. The first section reviews the psychological literature on the concepts and processes of internalization and the function of internalized objects. Psychoanalytic and object relations perspectives will be drawn upon to focus specifically on the concepts of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. The second section discusses the psychological and religious literature concerning studies of God representation.

Object Representation

Internalization Processes

Internalization processes are central to understanding self-development. Internalization is a process by which an interpersonal experience is transformed into an internal experience, therefore becoming part of the psychological dynamics of the person. Jones (1996) stated, “Internalization is an active, transformative process in which experience becomes a part of, and thereby transforms, the ego” (p. 34). Jones put it more simply when he said, “In real life the self and its relationships are one” (p. 37), a process that occurs through the interpersonal dynamic of internalization.

In the process of development through relational experiences with important and primary others, the self constructs meanings about self, others, and relating. If an individual’s relational environment is adequate or “good enough” (Winnicott, 1971)

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(i.e., one is accepted, cared for, understood), attachment and connection take place and the self eventually takes on the functions of the caring other.

As internalization takes place over time, aspects of significant relational experiences become a part of the self through mental representations, memories, and sensory data. Meanings are naturally constructed and organized from these internalized relational experiences. Gradually, the meanings constructed from internalizations come to define aspects of the true self as acceptable to have and show, and other aspects of the true self as not acceptable to have and show; therefore, they have to be sealed off and defended against (Trembley, 1996). The self's images and internal representations of significant others and their associated behaviors were originally experienced in relation to some actual significant other, but now they are ingrained in the self as meaning truths about the self, the world, and relating (Trembley, 1996).

**Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena**

Part of this process of internalization is the development of the capacity to be alone. The earlier parental or caregiver provision of holding the baby in safety and trust, and then the provision of allowing the baby to be alone while in the presence of the other, allows for the gradual development of an inner environment of internalized others, which continues to allow the baby to feel safe in the absence of the other. Gradually, if this environment is adequate, the baby learns that, although others may be absent for a time, they will return and he or she is safe. Essential to this process is the capacity to form images, to entertain fantasies, and to have memories of the holding other, to transition or bridge the absences and frustrations which are inherent
in relating to another. Eventually, this sense of caring and safety becomes a part of the self as one starts to take care of oneself as one’s others once did.

This area of transitional experiencing is what aids us in the never-ending task of learning to live with refusals and absences of a caregiver, learning to separate from internalized or actual others, and learning to separate from prior self meanings to new self meanings. It is critical in the process of development because it allows separation while keeping related self and other, so that moving away from actual others or meanings previously held doesn’t mean absolute loss or absolute independence (Trembley, 1996).

Winnicott (1971) discussed the terms *transitional objects* and *transitional phenomena*. He stated:

The third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (p. 2)

He felt this intermediate psychological space is the place of play, artistic creativity and appreciation, religious feelings, and a host of other experiences, and that this mediating area provides relief from the strain of reality acceptance. He spoke about the failure of a person to make use of transitional objects and this area of play. “In favorable circumstances (i.e., circumstances that support basic trust) the potential space becomes filled with the products of the baby’s own creative imagination. In unfavorable circumstances the creative use of objects is missing or relatively uncertain” (Winnicott, 1971, pp. 101–102).

Paul Pruyser (1968) described the relevance of the transitional object this way:
If one can be alone with the internal representation of a benign object, human or divine, that grants the exercise of autonomy and a spirited use of the imagination, the fantasy can be productive, inventive, happy and potentially creative. But if one is saddled with a haunting introject, human or divine, one cannot be happy while alone and is doomed to engage in rather morbid, repetitious fantasizing, beset with fears and worries. (p. 87)

This capacity that Winnicott called the “capacity to be alone,” is a developmental accomplishment and a gift of the caring other, who secures the place of a tolerable and safe solitude.

Elsewhere Winnicott (1953) described the way the true self, which has the potential for creative use of objects, gives place to the defense of the compliant false self. Like Datz (1995), he spoke of the danger of this potential space becoming filled with what is injected into it from someone other than the person. He added, “It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it” (p. 102). Winnicott continued his exposition of transitional phenomena by emphasizing the need for trust as its basic ingredient, without which the individual is impinged upon by persecutory elements and has no means of ridding himself of them. He added:

The mother adapts to the needs of her baby and of her child who is gradually evolving in personality and character, and this adaptation gives her a measure of reliability. The baby’s experience of this reliability over a period of time gives rise in the baby and growing child to a feeling of confidence. The baby’s confidence in the mother’s reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life. (p. 109)

These issues of gradually moving away from current attachment never really end in the life cycle of the self’s development. The child who struggles as he or she enters school for the first time; the college graduate struggling to move away from his or her accomplishments toward a new type of relating that is more inclusive and
deeply committed to others' well-being; or the woman dedicated to inclusion types of projects like raising children, but now is being pulled to focus more time on autonomous activities—are all struggles of the constant, life-long tension between inclusion and distinctness.

The challenge the individual faces at these transitional times is that of struggling away from the prior self-other balances to new self-other balances not yet known or experienced. This concept, introduced by Kegan (1982), involves movements toward either autonomy or inclusion, both aided by the “good enough” (Winnicott, 1953) holding culture of others that support the project, at any developmental level. These movements almost always are experienced as a pull to keep the past and its meanings intact and as a need to reject features of that very past (Kegan, 1982; Trembley, 1996).

Anderson and Hopkins (1991), in their research with 100 women, asked similar questions about developmental transitions:

How do we find the courage to let go of what feels sure and safe and comfortable so that a new possibility can unfold? And how do we do this not just once, at the end of childhood, but many times throughout a lifetime, whenever old certainties need to be released, or perhaps abandoned entirely, so that we can take that enormous step across the threshold of our old home? (p. 45)

Although they did not speak directly of transitional phenomena, they were certainly speaking of an area of experiencing that holds the project so that it is even a possibility. Banschick (1996) spoke of God representations in adolescence and agreed that the experience of God can be very functional in the process of development. “God can be a safe place like Winnicott’s notion of a ‘holding environment’” (p. 76), where the person can experiment with a variety of individual and other dynamics.
In his paper "The Functions of Inner Objects," Helm (1970) spoke of three functions of inner objects. First, they serve as inner referents providing a file for mental recall. Second, they serve as guideposts for interpersonal relationships. Third, they can be viewed as contributing to the autonomy of the individual, constituting inner resources and facilitating an inner dialogue. Speaking about disturbances in inner object functions, he says:

We must remind ourselves that human relationships unfold dialectically in a manner which affects the inner as well as the outer objects: the inner objects, while being affected by the outer objects, are constantly remodeled and restructured. But, to a degree, the inner objects—through the efforts of an actively adapting subject—also affect outer objects. This accounts for the dialectic, expanding circularity of the relationship. A disturbance of inner object functions then implies that, on one level or the other, this dialectic circularity is interfered with. (p. 322)

Discussing internalization processes, Schafer (1968) feels that the preservation of object representations that are negative may have to do with guilt, repetitive working over of trauma in an effort to overcome it, controlling the threatening or unreliably gratifying object, preserving the infantile sense of omnipotence by participating in the power of the mighty object, preferring a bad object (or a stable bad reality) over no object (or no stable reality) at all, or preferring a bad object over a too-seductive object, defensively internalizing the aggressor, wishing to destroy the bad object by cannibalistic incorporation and then fantasizing deserved punishment by the vengeful incorporated object that lives on, attributing one’s own bad feelings to a libidinally maintained internal object as a way of relieving anxiety and guilt, anticipating danger situations so as to be ready for them, preserving a private channel for gratification of aggressive desires, and inventing a firm, guiding, and controlling internal influence when one has not been able, for whatever reason, to find or submit to such an influence in the environment. (p. 114)

Schafer (1968) believed that a person’s capacity to use the products of internalization in an active, adaptive manner depends on the experience the person had with his first objects. “On the basis of this experience, he can afford to develop
and maintain significant object relations alongside his various internalizations and in interaction with them” (p. 236).

God Representation

McDargh (1986) stated, “The dynamic of object representation in general, and the formation of the object representation of God in particular, is inextricably involved in the processes whereby human beings maintain themselves and develop as selves” (p. 114). He felt that one cannot hold on to a sense of self-containing intellectual integrity and independence and continue to relate to certain representations of God and vice versa. For example, a God representation that demands passivity, total dependence, and a silencing of one’s thinking and voice would be incompatible with a sense of self that feels capable and responsible for facing life’s struggles and choices. McDargh spoke of his case studies of two women in the following way: “With both women the mitigation of the false self is a matter of faith, the growth of an inner assurance that they can live out of their true selves and not risk being undone” (p. 234).

Rizzuto (1979) and Winnicott (1953) both placed the origin of the God representation in the realm of transitional objects and transitional space phenomena, which means that the God representation originates in the individual in that area of experiencing devoted to negotiating inner and outer realities, and used by the individual to negotiate aloneness, togetherness, and separateness. The original source of the God representation remains naturally the representations of primary objects. One of Rizzuto’s (1979) understandings was that the God representation is a kind of transitional object that has the potential for integrating and also fragmenting one’s overall self experience. In fact, the God representation may become incompatible with
self balance so that it cannot function naturally as a transitional object. Crucial to this present study is the concept of transitional processes. Of significance is whether the God representation is employed as help or hindrance in managing developmental tasks, and whether it is available to be the guarantor and protector of play (i.e., a safe and benign representation which permits the free use of creativity without psychological consequences), and not one more demanding and unpredictable figure to contend with.

Both Rizzuto (1979) and McDargh (1986) believed that an individual’s sense of self is significantly affected by the representational traits of an individual’s private God, which implies that the representation may be used at the service of the self or as an impediment to it. Both authors considered the God representation a special kind of transitional object, given the fact that the God representation does not lose meaning, but instead its meaning fluctuates throughout life “at the service of gaining leverage with oneself, with others, and with life itself” (Rizzuto, 1979, p. 179). In a sense, creating and finding God never ceases in the course of human life, since negotiating inner and outer reality is a never-ending task.

Similar to Rizzuto and Winnicott, Meissner (1984) viewed God representations, faith, prayer, and religious symbols as transitional phenomena, helping a person to link his or her subjective and objective worlds. He viewed religious experience as potentially ego-adaptive. He underscored the importance and value of Winnicott’s creative view of illusion as “a form of transition indispensable for human psychological growth, balance and the acquiring of psychic meaning and substance” (p. 177). Meissner talked about faith as regressive and related to early drives, but also as a mechanism drawing on ego energies that employ creativity developed throughout a person’s interpersonal history. Therefore, for him, faith is not
just regressive but adaptive and integrative. “It may serve as a psychological force that supports the person in his/her attempts at defining and realizing the self” (p. 133). His work pointed to the interplay of culture, religion, and individual development. He believed that religions are expressions of human need and that, as such, they cannot be assessed in isolation from those contexts since they answer specific cultural requirements. Meissner focused on “understanding the interaction between levels of cultural influence and of inner developmental exigency and expression” (p. 159).

Jones (1991) expanded the focus on God images to one on the broader relationship with God or the sacred. He shifted the focus from defenses against instincts and a manifestation of internalized objects to an understanding of religion as a relationship, or “transfessional ground” with God, which reflects a person’s deep structure of internalized relationships. In his case examples, Jones demonstrated how relationships with God may display or disclose a person’s internalized relationships. Shafranske (1996) also viewed God representations as personal expressions and statements of one’s relationship within the universe of significant psychological objects. He called them “expressions of one’s personal cosmology,” which describe the nature of an individual’s relationship with a kind of embodiment that represents the source of all otherness.

An individual’s representations, for example, a personal God, an impersonal force, or an absence of a meaningful other, reflect the rudimentary psychological foundation on which the forging of a sense of place within the cradle of the universe will be carried out. (Shafranske, 1996, p. 58)

Datz (1995) conducted a study in which she examined women’s experience with an exclusively male God-image, the effects of no female God-image, and the impact of this reality on the relationships to self, others, and the institutional church. Her qualitative study was conducted with eight Roman Catholic women, ages 44 and
54. By taking the results and intertwining them with psychoanalytic, faith development, and female development theory, she concluded that the God representation in women is often limiting, because in the “play space” described by Winnicott, women are impinged upon by an environment that sanctions only the masculine image of God. She equated this to violating a person’s transitional space and therefore one’s potential for wholeness. In other words, Datz suggested that this area of intermediate experiencing, which does not belong to either inner or outer reality, is impinged upon by the patriarchal culture, therefore losing its potential for aiding in the task of balance and integration. As the women in her study negotiated changes, eventually that “play space” enlarged and supported a more free imagination. She added:

The result of this “discovery” for the women, after struggling through a period of formlessness in relationship to the God-image, is described as an increase in trust in their own experience of God and owning that experience, and increased trust in themselves. (p. 117).

The women she studied eventually shifted their God representation to a female representation, which Datz felt authorized their being as a divine being. She explained: “As a psychological phenomenon, the emergence of a female image of God denotes a self and cultural valuing: I, as a woman, reflect God, or God, imaged as a woman, is like me as a woman” (p. 121).

In favorable circumstances (those that allow for the development of basic trust) the use of the God representation would support the developmental process of identifying and realizing the self while connected to others. For some women, this “potential space” of creativity and imagination might enable them to find the empowering of self-authorship and the ability to perceive and consider choices. As well, one might find the support for a level of self-trust. In less favorable circumstances, the God representation might act to hinder identifying and realizing
the self. Some women’s God representations might involve a great deal of fear about disconnection and not being good enough. They might also offer support for the internalization of a flawed self, in need of punishment, redeemed only by appeasing the other—a self in constant need of external help to consistently support and define the self. The normal re-elaboration of the self would therefore be constrained by an “other” representation that is unable to support and hold the more autonomous self.

Whether a woman’s God representation is usable for the multiple processes of self-becoming appears related to the dynamics of its relational origins, which includes relational experiences of self, both within an individual and within a larger culture (Rizzuto, 1979). Rizzuto said, “Only in pathological cases and within the limits of the manifest pathology do self and object representations appear fixed” (p. 200). Datz (1995), speaking of the women in her study, supported the above contention and called attention to the fact that, in health, the use of objects in the transitional space is fluid and changeable.

In summary, the formation and function of the God representation seems related to processes of separation and individuation and the mediating dynamics of transitional objects and transitional phenomena. It is suggested that women’s experience of the Divine differs from that of men, although both make use of their God representations, with more or less success, to negotiate aspects of their development. Jones (1996) called for “an appreciation of the integrity and centrality of pre-oedipal dynamics, which might point to an ethic of relatedness in which the maintenance of connections [pre-oedipal] between people is more central than the imposition of rules [oedipal]” (p. 18). Whether these experiences assure “a resting place” where women can become empowered to live out of their true selves might depend on the traits of the God representation.
God Image Studies

God image formation has received a good amount of attention in the literature, as it relates to parental representations and experiences. More recent studies considering an array of variables pertaining to the origin and use of the God representation and applying diverse methodology to study the psychological impact of the God representation have begun to appear. Most studies tend to focus on image formation, not the function or psychological significance of one image or belief over another. Formation and function are interrelated concepts and as such are difficult to differentiate at times. The following review is intended to provide clarification and better understanding of the God image concept and the functions it might carry.

Freud (1912) was the first to postulate the formation of the God image. He believed that the God representation is formed out of the relationship and representation of the father, which awakens other representations, related to the primal father passed on through inheritance. Freud (1912) established themes of guilt and ritual as protection from punishment, fate, and death in his conceptions of the God representation. In his later work, *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he dealt with religion as childish wish fulfillments related to dependency needs and wishes, which make it necessary to hold onto belief in a powerful, protective father. Interestingly, all of his thinking about religion was related to male development, specifically the boy’s oedipal crisis and the father. He had no explanation for religious development in girls, except to hypothesize that it was the fruit of transmission through cross-inheritance.

Freud’s contention has not been consistently sustained in further research. Studies on the subject indicate mixed results. Tamayo and Dugas (1977), in studying the influence of field of study (i.e., major), level of studies (i.e., undergraduate/
graduate), and sex on the conceptual representation of mother, father, and God, in a sample of 351 male and female university students in Canada, found:

1. The variable sex had an influence on the representation of parents but not on the representation of God.

2. The field of studies and level of studies affected the conceptual image of God. Art students spoke of God as more maternal than paternal, and science and graduate students revealed an image modeled after the two parental images.

3. The mother image appeared to be the most adequate symbol for the representation of God. This was true for the entire sample without distinction of sex. These results are in direct contrast with Freud’s contention and point to the fact that the mother image can assume the function of being the internalized symbol of God, depending on the cultural background of the subject.

Vergote (1969) and Vergote and Aubert (1972) studied subjects from France, Belgium, and the United States using a God scale that had maternal and paternal characteristics. Comparison results indicate that for the French and Belgium samples, God image corresponded more with parental image according to the sex of the subject. In the American sample, for both females and males, the paternal image was more prevalent, particularly for males. Nevertheless, Vergote and Aubert (1972) concluded that it was the paternal symbol that was attributed to God, with its cultural characteristics of law and authority, not necessarily the representational father image, which was not measured by the study (i.e., the study used description of parents as the respondents thought they should be, not as they had known them). These results point to the need to take cultural contexts into account, which is affirmed also in Lobiondo’s (1993) dissertation that discussed mental representations of God, paternal internalizations, and ethnic identities of Italian-American women.
Lobiondo's sample of 15 third-generation Italian-American Roman Catholic women between the ages of 28 and 44 yielded results that substantiate previous research connecting God and paternal images, but it did so in a somewhat different manner. Images of and relationships with God seemed to be thematized in patterns that were extremely similar to those of attitudes toward and relationships with fathers. These patterns were also intrinsically connected with distinctive subthemes in Italian-American identity pertaining to relationships with men. She concluded:

Themes of a mysterious God, of a mysterious, volatile yet vulnerable father, and of the mysterious Italian father as publicly symbolic but not personally known family figurehead were significant for their consistency across topic areas. These reinforce views of father as a powerful authority and contribute to Italian American daughters' view of God as threateningly distant, unknowable, powerful, and requiring appeasement. (p. vii)

In the end, she makes a call for including and paying close attention to race and cultural matters when examining God image formation.

Roof and Roof (1984) also proposed influence of race and culture on the formation of the God image. Using data from the 1983 General Social Survey, which included questions about 12 different images of God, cross-tabulations were conducted with several social and demographic factors. The results are as follows:

1. For the sample as a whole, "creator" was the dominant image (82%) and "spouse" was the least popular (17%).
2. One fourth of the American population could image God as being like "mother," but, in agreement with Vergote et al. (1968), the overall thinking about God fell in paternal lines.
3. Females embraced the deity images more than males.
4. Older persons endorsed the deity images more than the young, except for the adjectives of "creator" and "friend," which yielded a slight reversal in the pattern.
5. Southerners were more likely to hold all of the adjectives for God (i.e., creator, spouse, mother, friend, etc.).

6. “Mother” images were more common among older, uneducated Southern women than for any other subgroup.

7. Different religious groups endorsed different adjectives of God. Protestants had higher than national averages on all the images. Catholics ranked below the national average on all images except “Redeemer.”

8. Different ages within the groups tended to cluster around particular adjectives.

Important considerations become clear from the above results: There is great variation in how Americans imagine God, and, once again, sex, race, and culture appear to be significant variables when studying the God image.

Examining the cultural experiences of gay and lesbian people, Marcellino (1996) explored how internalized self-hatred relates to self-concept and images of God. In her study of 172 men and women, ages 19 to 61, using the Multi-Axial Gay/Lesbian Inventory, The Tennessee Self-concept Scale, Gorsuch’s Adjective Ratings of God Scale, and a demographic questionnaire, she found that internalized homonegativity does relate to images of both self and God. In her findings, an increase in internalized homonegativity was correlated with three seemingly contradictory findings: (1) a decrease in God as transcendent and omnipotent, identified by Gorsuch as “traditional Christian”; (2) an increase in factors describing God as “benevolent,” “kind,” and “companionable”; and (3) an increase in God as “wrathful” and “powerful” but “passive.” Her findings confirm previous research utilizing factor analyses of God images, which suggests that instead of being uniform,
God images are richly individualized and complex, often containing multifaceted dynamics and meanings.

A study by Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn (1975) sampled 198 Catholic high school youth in the Denver area. They used an extensive test battery that included demographic items; a semantic differential scale for assessing self, father, and mother; a God image scale; and a self-esteem inventory. Their findings suggested (a) a relationship between the God image and the image of the preferred parent for females; (b) some support for the father referencing of the psychoanalytic position for males; (c) no support for the like-sex modeling position of social learning theory (i.e., females will have their mothers as reference for their God representation, while males will have their fathers); and (d) tentative support for the self-esteem position (i.e., an individual’s God representation will be correlated with that individual’s self-esteem).

The study warned of taking the validity of any one assumption individually to explain the origin of the God representation, and it pointed to differences that may be encountered when considering sex of the subject. Similar results were outlined by Nelson (1971). Other studies (Birky & Ball, 1987; Tamayo & Desjardins, 1976) linked the God representation to a parental composite, belonging to neither parent separately, but to which both parents contribute.

Greeley (1981), in his book *The Religious Imagination*, outlined the results of a survey study with 2,500 young Catholics. The data analyzed through multiple regression, factor analyses, and correlation techniques yielded information on various variables affecting God images. The principal variable affecting loving images of God, Jesus, and Mary was family relationships, although this variable yielded different views according to gender. Young men’s God images were influenced significantly by closeness to both parents. Young women’s God images were influenced significantly
by closeness to their fathers. Moreover, for young people of both sexes, closeness of parents to one another was an important variable. Greeley stated:

Parents are storytellers. They are telling the story of their own lives and of the romance, with its ups and downs, of their life together... The underlying theme of hope or despair, of graciousness or absurdity which runs through the parental story is surely communicated with the main themes of the stories... The religious imagination of young people is powerfully influenced in the family of origin. Other factors, as we shall see, make their contribution too; but they are building on a foundation that the family has laid. (p. 61)

Greeley outlined some of these other factors:

1. Religious experience: Both religious experiences and learning about the meaning of life from nature correlated strongly and positively with gracious stories of God.

2. Quality of education: This refers to the quality of relationships with teachers, not quantity in terms of years of religious education or academic experience in a religious schools.

3. Influence of friends: This was a more powerful factor for women than for men.

4. Spouse’s God image: Among married couples, Greeley found a strong correlation between a spouse’s God images and a respondent’s images. “The strongest impact seems to be the influence of husbands on wives, especially in the first decade of marriage” (p. 95). In addition, the influence of spouses on each other’s religious imagination was especially powerful when both were satisfied with their sexual relationship.

5. Social attitudes: Those who pictured God as mother and lover were much more likely to be socially concerned than those who did not.

6. Feminism: Feminism (as defined by “the propensity to blur the distinction between the male and female roles”) was not found to affect religious imagination.
Greeley spoke of the hope-engendering nature of a person’s religious experience. He believed these experiences are recorded first in the space we call “imagination” (perhaps Winnicott’s play space, creative encounters). There, the experiences have an enormous and sometimes overwhelming effect (p. 10). He concluded by saying, “Stories of God are more powerful than propositions about God, and stories about God are the result of the experiences of loving goodness in human relations rather than of propositional instruction” (p. 236).

Taking a similar view, White (1984) spoke of the impact of early relationships on the internal representations of God, and of those representations on subsequent relationships. He concluded, “The Imago Dei is most centrally relational” (p. 290). In agreement with object relations theorist Fairbairn that libido is not primarily pleasure-seeking, White diverted from the position by introducing the Imago Dei as the origin of this object-seeking nature. MacDargh (1983) as well focused on the relational component of both self and other representations as he examined the case histories of two female subjects. Agreeing with the basic premises of Freud, he differed from his position in his understanding of human motivation, which for him involved the creation and maintenance of a sense of being a self-in-relationship.

Some studies have linked God image formation to an individual’s self-esteem or self-referencing. Buri and Muller (1993) found that, although parent’s nurturance, authority, and authoritativeness were related to conceptions of God, the variable of self-esteem far outweighed other variables in accounting for the variance in God concepts. Naturally the variable self-esteem is confounded in various others variables, including parents’ nurturance and family environment.

Similarly, Benson and Spilka (1973) found evidence of like patterning between self and God images. Positive self-esteem was correlated with a loving God
image, and negative self-esteem was correlated with controlling God images. Critics of their study speak about the confound that exists between positive self-regard and positive parent referencing. In particular, a study by Chartier and Goehner (1976) pointed to the problems inherent in the above confound. After conducting a study examining the relationships of parental communication, self-esteem, and God image with 84 male and female 10th and 11th graders enrolled at a Christian high school in California, the authors found that significant relationships exist between parental communication and self-esteem, between self-esteem and God image, and between practical communication (i.e., constructive, as perceived by the adolescent) and the adolescent’s image of God. They concluded:

Belief in a loving and accepting God develops in the same kind of family atmosphere required for the development of high self-regard. How an adolescent feels about himself and about God may very well be influenced by the quality of the communication relationship that has existed between himself and his parents. . . . How an adolescent views God is also functionally related to his self-esteem, but the common variable for both self-esteem and God image seems to be the quality of family communication. (p. 230)

Continuing in the area of parental involvement and childhood experiences, Potvin (1977) looked at adolescent God images with variables such as parental education, parental religious practice, parental affection, parental control, self-esteem, and years attending religious classes. Results supported a socialization theory and a parental projection theory of God image formation. Self-esteem was found relevant only as it related to older females and only as it distinguished between belief and nonbelief in a personal God, not between punishing and loving images of God. The author considered whether God images affect self-images among older females and not the other way around, as proposed by Spilka et al. (1975). He wrote, “Perhaps this process is especially salient for older females because of their lower status in a society which is still largely male dominated” (p. 51). Potvin’s study also pointed to
the fact that one can hold a loving yet punishing God image. Forty-five percent of his sample believed in a God that was both punishing and loving. His findings did not support the view that self-esteem discriminates between loving and punishing God images.

Johnson and Eastburg (1992) examined the God concept, parent concept, and self-concept of abused and nonabused elementary school children. Results indicated that abused children had lower self-concepts than nonabused children, and that they viewed their parents as less kind and more wrathful. Surprisingly, there were no differences in the God concepts of abused and nonabused children. The authors hypothesized that the effects of parental abuse on the God concept may appear only later in development, which might be dependent on the development of abstract reasoning, or that “young children are more psychologically invested in denying the existence of abusive traits in the divine being” (p. 240). Their findings are in direct opposition to the findings of Justice and Lambert (1986), who concluded:

Not only does the image of God tend to be patterned after the image of the parents, but that those who have had strongly negative experiences with their parents (such as sexual abuse) tend to have a more negative concept of the personality of God. (p. 170)

There is no specific information about the age of the latter subjects; thus, a comparison is difficult to establish.

Kane, Cheston, and Greer (1993) supported Justice and Lambert’s (1986) findings in their study of the perceptions of God by female survivors of childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by a father figure. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between how the female survivors of sexual abuse and nonabused women viewed God. Comparison of the two groups indicated that the survivors had more negative feelings about God than did the comparison group. The
variables disapproving or approving, permissive or rigid as it relates to God, correctly
classified the majority of the subjects into incest victims and control subjects.

Nye and Carlson (1984) assessed the general cognitive stage development and
the development of the concept of God in 180 children ages 5 to 16. Their results
indicated that the development of the concept of God in children parallels Piaget’s
general stages of cognitive development. Younger children were significantly less
abstract in their expressions of the concept of God than were children in two older
groups. Their data suggest that expressions of the God concept are largely age
dependent, reflecting more a developmental effect than a religious orientation effect.

On a similar note, Tamayo and Desjardins (1976), in their investigation of
whether the structure of the divine image could be differentially modeled on parental
images according to the belief system of the individual (abstract or concrete), found
some significant results. Influence due to sex of the respondent revealed that mother-
father and parent-God distance scores were larger for the boys than for the girls. The
mother-father distance score was smaller than either the mother-God or the father-
God distance and the latter two were equivalent. In terms of belief system, the
distance score revealed that abstract subjects had a larger father-God distance score
than did concrete subjects. The results supported the hypothesis that abstract
individuals would have as a divine image a mixture of both parental images with an
emphasis on the mother image. For concrete individuals, however, the expectation
that their divine image would be closer to that of the father than that of the mother
was only partially confirmed.

Roberts (1989), in his study of 185 residents of a Midwestern university town,
found a pattern of both nurturing and disciplining characterizations for God and
found evidence supporting the hypothesis that those who imagine God as nurturing
described themselves in a similar way. Nevertheless, he questioned the attempt to understand God formation using projection theories only. He felt that the social context places limitations on the quality of what is projected, bringing to the surface only a partial picture of how God is imagined. Roberts proposed other theories as possibly containing the "rest of the picture," such as exchange theory, symbolic interactionism, and attribution theory. He explained that "since it appears that God both delineates and reinforces 'appropriate' behaviors," (p. 283) one could explain the concept of a two-dimensional God (nurturing vs. punishing) by (a) the tendency people have to behave in order to maximize rewards and minimize costs (exchange theory); (b) the desire of people to be understood, therefore behaving in ways that are meaningful to others (symbolic interactionism); or (c) attributions of God of cause versus responsibility involving unrelated judgments about events (attribution theory).

Another study by Jolley and Taulbee (1986) looked at self and God perceptions of 94 prisoners and 90 college students. The results tended to support the idea that a positive self-concept correlates positively with loving God images. Nevertheless, in comparing the prisoners to students, this view held true more for the prisoners than for the students. The authors concluded that more complex instruments and measures might be needed to measure such concepts as self and God representations. The results revealed that the "controlling God scale" used did not show this factor to be negatively related to positive self-attitudes as was predicted. The authors pondered whether "the respondents did not perceive a more controlling deity as necessarily more harsh but rather a basic characteristic of the Supreme Being and perhaps even a positive attribute" (p. 1145). Also, in agreement with Potvin's (1977) study, the view that self-esteem discriminates between punishing and loving images of God may not be supported.
Also attempting to assess perceptions of self, mother, father, and God, Morgan (1978) studied 53 psychiatric patients (27 psychotics and 26 nonpsychotics) and 70 nonpatient subjects, using the Leary Interpersonal Checklist. The results indicated that nonpsychotics depreciated themselves yet were concerned with dominance or submission in their perceptions of others, and psychotics tended to project their own hostility or perceive others in idealized or condemning ways. Patients in general perceived themselves less similar to parents, including the preferred parent, and less similar to God than nonpatients. Morgan discussed the two types of projection that were particular salient in perceptions of mother, father, and God: attributive (consciously attributing to others one’s own traits) and complementary (ascribing to others those traits which are a counterpart of one’s own traits).

Dickie et al. (1997) conducted a series of three studies to examine parent-child relationships, taking into account sex, age, perceptions of power, nurturance, and disciplining styles as related to God images. In the first study, 143 children ages 4 through 11 were asked to report how discipline was administered in their homes and to indicate their perceptions of the nurturance and power of their parents and their God representation. Results indicated that when parents were perceived as nurturing and powerful (especially when mother was perceived as powerful and father was perceived as nurturing), children perceived God as both nurturing and powerful. Interestingly, the children perceived God more like father in early childhood and more like mother or both parents in middle childhood. In addition, girls’ images were more related to parents’ attributes and discipline styles than were boys’ God images.

In the second study, the authors focused on the parents’ use of power and reasoning in discipline to explore whether parental discipline could explain why young boys (ages 4 to 5)
seemed to see God and father as most powerful, while young girls perceived
God and father as least powerful. (p. 25)

The sample involved 47 girls and 47 boys recruited from a Head Start day-care, a
nursery school, and two central city elementary schools. Some of the results
replicated results from the first study; children from the youngest age group perceived
God as more different from both mother and father than did older children. In
addition, younger children perceived mother to be more different from God than they
perceived father. God was perceived as more nurturing and powerful when father was
absent, which was hypothesized in the study as an effect of “attachment substitute.”
Other results differed from the first study; girls did not perceive God to be more like
parents than did boys, and fathers were not perceived to be as nurturing as God and
mother. As in the first study, “father’s nurturance, along with age, emerged from the
regression equation as significant. God was perceived as more nurturing when
parents, particularly the father, were perceived as nurturing and as children moved
from early to middle childhood” (p. 25).

In the third study, the same authors returned to the original samples and
assessed self-perceptions in order to see if “self-perceptions were better predictors of
children’s God-concepts than were perceptions of parents” (p. 33) They found no
support for this proposition. Replicating the first study, “the father’s characteristics
were most important for children perceiving God as nurturing while the mother’s
characteristics were most important for perceiving God as powerful” (p. 33).

Dickie et al. (1997) indicated the results supported the contention that God
image was most similar to the most idealized parent and that attachment theory could
also provide another explanation: when parents are less available, God becomes the
perfect substitute attachment figure. They also felt the results supported the gender
theories of Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan and Wiggins (1988), which proposed that, because

most children from infancy to about age 7 are raised predominantly by women, girls identify with the nurturing role of the mother and her nurturing capacities and remain attached to their care-givers. Boys, on the other hand, identify more with their fathers and attempt to separate from their maternal care-givers in an effort to establish male identity. (p. 2)

This seems to indicate that images of God as a powerful, just authority and/or images of God as a nurturing, compassionate caregiver relate to sex of the respondent. This finding might explain why Vergote and Aubert (1972), in their survey of five studies, discovered that boys from the United States showed a distinctly paternal image of God while girls showed both maternal and paternal images of God. This implies that the mother-God image is viewed as one who welcomes and cares for the child (nurturance), while the father-God image is viewed as one of authority and law (power).

Using the 1983 General Social Survey, Nelsen, Cheek, and Au (1985) looked at sex differences in images of God. Three images of God factors were identified: God as King, as healer, and as relational. Women scored higher only on the God as healer (a supportive factor) image. The authors proposed that this higher score for women may be related to the fact that this factor has a substantial positive relationship with church attendance, and women traditionally frequent church more than men do. The differences between men and women in regards to the God-as-healer image are significantly diminished when church attendance is controlled for. Factor analyses of the data indicated that males held the traditional image of God (God as King), and females held to an image of God as healer.

Cunningham (1994) conducted interviews with 12 subjects (7 females and 5 males) who identified themselves as having gone through a “life-changing” event,
after which they viewed themselves differently. The results of her qualitative study suggest, as the above results do, that differences in gender regarding God representation follow the patterns outlined by Chodorow, Gilligan, and other development theorists. Like Rizzuto, she concluded that the self-other-God image is a personally constructed psychological constellation that evolves over the life span and that as one component of the construct is modified, the others will be influenced as well. In her study she found significant differences in worldview, in orientations, and in ideas about self, others, and God images related to gender (not sex of the subject, but their gender orientations). She discussed the masculine/feminine experience in development and how representations of God seem to be affected by the different tasks of differentiating and integrating for the different genders. She concluded:

Men living out strictly traditional values of masculinity and women living out strictly traditional values of femininity may be in danger of denying aspects of God, of the Greater Whole within themselves. The integration of both genders within the self does not mean the giving up of anything. It means the bringing to life and expressing a fuller sense of the whole self. (p. 391)

Saussy (1991), after conducting a qualitative study with 21 women, spoke of the relationship between God images and self-esteem. She focused on the intrinsic relationship between belief in self and belief in a loving God. Like Datz (1995), she related the concept of a loving God representation to the empowerment of oneself to define self. She discussed the importance of understanding the difference between one’s concept of God and one’s internal representation of God. She added:

A very positive concept of God may be in sharp contrast to an unconscious, exacting, punishing God representation. She may express faith in a loving, caring, intimate God, but undermine her faith in self by keeping alive a cruel, demanding, God representation. (p. 50)
Saussy’s study highlighted the danger to women’s self-esteem inherent in living in a patriarchal society and indicated that this self-experience is correlated with the experience women have of the Divine.

Saussy (1991) may be referring to what clinically might be termed *compensatory splitting*. She indicated that some women in her study held to a supposedly loving God concept but not a positive self-representation. She believed that, if integrated, one would hold a positive God representation while embracing faith in one’s abilities, intrinsic worth, capacity for intimacy and value, and ability to respond to the challenges of life. She suggested that “faith in God” is sometimes used as an escape from faith in self and that “what many women and men call faith in God is an escape for the need to establish a foundational belief in their own value and destiny . . .” (p. 13).

Brokaw and Edwards (1994) looked at the relationship of God image to level of object relations development, which refers to level of bonding or attachment in relationships, level of separation and individuation, level of integration of good and bad internal objects and self-objects, and level of resolution of one’s relationship with authority as well as one’s own sense of personal power and authority. Their sample of 92 undergraduate Christian students from a religiously homogeneous population was tested with three measures of God image and three measures of object relations development. Results indicated that the objective measure of object relations, the Ego Function Assessment Questionnaire–Revised, correlated significantly with all three measures of God image. The higher the level of object relations, the more positive the image of God. The two projective measures of object relations, the Rorschach and the Comprehensive Object Relations Profile, showed only a few significant correlations with God image scales.
Tisdale et al. (1997) studied an in-patient sample of 99 religious patients with the predominant diagnosis of major depression. The majority of their subjects were female (n = 72). They looked specifically at the impact of treatment on God image and personal adjustment (one’s view of self or self-esteem), and also the correlation of God image to object relations development, using the Bell Object Relations Testing Inventory, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, the Lawrence God Image Inventory, and the Religious Experience Questionnaire. Results indicated that in-patient treatment had a significant positive impact on personal adjustment and God image. In addition, a positive God image was associated with higher object relations development. Improvement was maintained over the course of outpatient treatment (6 and 12 months after discharge), but no significant further improvement was noted.

Many theorists have outlined the importance of assessing and understanding one’s relationship with God as an integral part of understanding the person and his or her world (Erikson, 1956; Fairbaim, 1952; Meissner, 1978; Rizzuto, 1974; Winnicott, 1953). These authors suggested that individuals’ relationship with God is similar in many respects to their human relationships and that, as such, they are subject to health or distortion as development progresses. “Like other objects in one’s internal and external worlds, one’s God representation is subject to the dynamic laws of psychic defense, adaptation, and synthesis” (Rizzuto, 1974, p. 179).

The above suggests that a shift in one representation (self) will necessarily produce a shift in the other (other, God) or vice versa. McDargh (1986) stated:

Growth experiences that result in changes in the one will generate a sense of conflict or incongruence that precipitate the modification or reelaboration of the other. This process of change-conflict-change is where the action is in the maintenance of the self. (p.122)
Understanding the complex interplay of the many factors which bore its origin and development is crucial in understanding how the God representation is used (or is usable) for the self-becoming process (McDargh, 1986; Rizzuto, 1979).

Summary

The above studies point to the complexity of the subject and the importance of considering an array of variables when attempting to understand how an individual's God images are formed, are maintained, and influence an individual's life. One thing seems clear: relational experiences are at the basis of the formation and use of the God representation. Furthermore, identification with mothers, experience with fathers (i.e., quality of presence and absence), and learnings from the relationship with parents with each other seem to have the greatest impact on women's God representations. As well, individual experiences are shaped in a cultural context; therefore, cultural dynamics are an integral part of this process. Many of the studies raised questions regarding women's experience of themselves and others in cultures where they are seen as inferior and defective, and how this experience may affect women's self and God representations.

An important part of this cultural experience deals with specific religious contexts ranging from God, to liturgy, to the clergy. In most cultures, God is presented as male, and since God is the all-supreme, good, and superior being, man is therefore likewise, with the implication that the ultimate is associated only with the male. Sacred language is mostly male-oriented, accounting for the experiences of the male gender, therefore silencing and making nonexistent the female experience. As well, religious authorities are usually male. Only recently have women been allowed in the clergy and still with the understanding that their role is inferior to their male
counterparts (ordination is mostly unavailable to them, limiting many of their ministerial roles and undermining their authority). The implications of such dynamics on a person’s God representations can only be speculated. For women, it might serve to contribute to the creation or reinforcement of an already internalized damaged and inferior self.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Vocatus Atque non Vocatus deus aderit.
(Invoked or not invoked the god will be present.)
—The Oracle at Delphi

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe common themes present in the constructions and functions of the God representation in women. In particular, this study was interested in exploring the common themes and relationships between a woman’s internal representation of God and her use of that representation in the service of creating (developing who one is) and recreating (integrating old and new aspects) the self. How might a woman use her God representation in the process of developing what comes to be known as “who she is”? How might she use her God representation in the lifelong task of integrating old and new aspects of herself and the accompanying need to balance togetherness and separateness?

Qualitative research methods have been selected as most appropriate for this study, because these methods are particularly suited to identifying meanings people assign to their experiences (Hoshmand, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1991). Previous quantitative research studies suggested that the use of qualitative methodologies might be more appropriate for assessing the concept of God representations (Marcellino, 1996; Tisdale et al., 1997). The results of some of these previous quantitative studies were contradictory or incomplete, which led to questions as to the adequacy of the research methods employed.
The use of qualitative methodology in this research provided the researcher with a set of procedures for engaging with participants in a manner that allowed for the identification of God representation themes and relationships. The methodological skills required to carry out the research were heavily based on the ability to engage others, to listen carefully, to communicate understanding, and to perceive connection and themes in the reports of participants.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 10 women who reported an awareness of their God representation and who could engage in a conversation about their lives in relation to self, others, and relationships as identified by the women themselves in responding to a written announcement (Appendix A) and a screening interview (Appendix B) conducted by the researcher. Data from the interviews of 10 of the participants were used in the final analysis of the data (please see pages 49–50 for an explanation).

Procedures

Methods of Collecting Data

Two semistructured interviews of approximately 1½ hours each were conducted and provided the main methods of collecting data. The researcher felt that dividing the interviews into two parts would be less tiring for the participants. Also, the content of the questions provided a natural division, with the first interview focusing on the life history of the participant, and the second interview specifically focusing on God representation development and function. As Selltiz (1959) noted, interviews are the more appropriate technique for revealing complex information.
about emotion-laden subjects, or for probing feelings that may underlie an expressed opinion. Consistent with the understanding that people are the most knowledgeable about their own meanings, internal reliability was sought throughout the interview by rechecking with the participant the researcher's understandings about the participant's meanings.

The first semistructured interview included two sections:

1. A developmental history (Appendix F). The focus of the developmental history part of the interview was on the life history of the participant's God representation. The researcher paid close attention to each participant's life history in attempting to understand how the life history and the God representation fit together. Specifically, the relationship between the God representation and a participant's relational background were of central interest. This emphasis is reflective of the literature, which consistently has outlined relationship history as crucial to the understanding of God representations (Jones, 1996; MacDargh, 1983; Marcellino, 1996; Pruyser, 1968; Rizzuto, 1974, 1979; Tisdale et al., 1997).

2. Drawings of family and self. Drawings of family and self were used solely as an aid to eliciting further verbal data regarding the participant's conscious memories, feelings, and thoughts concerning herself and her family. Although drawings are often a psychologically useful projective measure of an individual's self and other image and of an individual's concerns, in this study the participant's drawings were not used as a projective measure of unconscious material. They were used as an extension of the type of conscious verbal material elicited by open-ended interview questions. Emphasis was placed upon the verbal descriptions of the drawings rather than upon a projective interpretation of the drawings themselves.

The second semistructured interview included the following three sections:
1. Focus questions (Appendix G). The 30 focus questions examined the participants’ awareness of their God representation, the history of their God representation, and the uses they have made of it in both the past and present. The 30 questions were guided in part by the research conducted by Rizzuto (1979) and McDargh (1986).

2. Three short stories (Appendix H). The three short stories were designed to give participants an opportunity to “think out loud” about dilemmas surrounding different aspects of life. Care was given to focus the content of the stories around the themes of relationships, handling aloneness, and imagination and creativity, which are supported by the literature as highly relevant to the understanding of the God representation (Anderson & Hopkins, 1991; McDargh, 1986; Rizzuto, 1979; Winnicott, 1971). The stories’ primary purpose was to record the internal dialogues concerning how the God representation influenced a woman navigating through choices, decisions, and dilemmas. The technique of using experiments and/or hypothetical situations to observe the process people go through in thinking about situations and making decisions was first used by Jean Piaget to portray the developmental course of children’s thought. From his observations of children he was able to develop categories of cognitive development. In this research, observing and recording the participants’ internal dialogues about hypothetical situations supposedly unrelated to them served to confirm or rule out patterns of dealing with self and others identified in relationship to their own story.

3. Drawing of God. Participants’ drawings of God were used in the same manner as the family and self drawings in the first part of the structured interview, as described above (p. 45). The drawing of God was used solely as an aid to eliciting
further verbal data regarding the participant’s conscious memories, feelings, and thoughts concerning her God.

In addition to the above interview content, data also included audiotaped and written memos of the researcher’s internal dialogues, insights, hunches, hypotheses, discussions, and consultations with other professionals, the dissertation chair and committee members, and colleagues. Qualitative studies often include the researchers’ experiences of the subject under study as part of the database and their thoughts and internal monologue about the project (Polkinghorne, 1991).

**Methods of Data Storage**

All of the information collected from participants was kept confidential. This means that no participant’s name appeared on any papers on which information received from participants was recorded. Interview forms were all coded and the researcher maintained a separate master list with the participants’ names and corresponding assigned code names. Once the data were collected and analyzed, the master list was destroyed. All other forms will be retained for 3 years in a locked file in Dr. Edward L. Trembley’s office, and a copy will be retained for 3 years in a locked file in Herdley O. Paolini’s office.

**Recruitment of Participants**

Participants were recruited by announcements (Appendix A) placed at churches, colleges, universities, and retreat centers. Self-selected potential participants were invited to inform the researcher of their interest by returning the bottom part of the announcement containing their name, phone number, and a check
mark expressing their interest. Interested persons were screened for research participation until 10 women were selected.

Selection Procedures

The following questions and statements (see Appendix B: Telephone Screening Interview) were used in the screening of potential participants:

1. “Thank you for your interest in my research project. I really appreciate your filling out the research invitation form.”

The researcher attempted to convey with this statement her appreciation for potential participants' willingness to consider participation in the research and their interest in signing the invitation form.

2. “How/where did you hear about this research?”

This question sought to identify the place where potential participants first learned about the research. This information helped the researcher to identify the location from which potential participants came and to determine whether the sample's origin was homogeneous or heterogeneous.

3. “What interested you about it?”

This question was intended to further engage the research participants. It also sought to identify potential participants' ability to dialogue about the research subject and their motivation and expectations for participating in the study. This knowledge aided the researcher in being sensitive to the needs of the research participants.

4. “Are you 25 years of age or older?”

In order to achieve the purposes of the research, it was necessary for participants to have had sufficient life experiences, therefore the need to assess if potential participants met the researcher-determined age criteria.
5. "How do you feel about discussing your feelings and experiences about the God you believe or do not believe in?"

This question sought to identify potential participants’ ability to engage in a conversation about the research subject and their level of comfort with it. The success of the research rested upon participants’ ability to dialogue about their experiences.

6. "Are you able to commit to meeting with me for two interviews of 90 minutes each?"

This question was meant to clarify potential participants’ understanding about the time involved in the research and their willingness to commit to the amount of time required.

7. "Do you have any questions, concerns, or worries about participating in this research?"

This question demonstrated sensitivity to the needs of the participants and provided an opportunity to answer any questions they might have about it.

If potential participants met all the research criteria as defined by their answers to the above questions, the researcher then proceeded with the following questions:

8. "When can we meet for the two interviews?"

The researcher sought to arrange a time that was mutually agreeable and accommodated the participants as much as possible.

9. "Can we meet in my office in Maple Plain?"

If the participant was unable or unwilling to meet there, the researcher asked for suggestions, and a mutually agreeable place was determined. Five interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office, four in participants’ offices, and one in a participant’s home.
10. "May I have your address so I can send you confirmation of the date, time, and place of our interviews?"

This was requested to provide participants with a written confirmation of the time and place of the interviews and, if necessary, directions to the researcher’s office.

A confirmation letter (Appendix C) was sent to the 10 women selected for the research.

Interview Procedures

Two 90-minute interviews were conducted with each of the 10 participants used in the final analysis of the data. With 6 participants, the two interviews were conducted at the same time with a break of 20–30 minutes between the interviews. With 4 participants, the two interviews were conducted on separate days, with the time between first and second interviews varying from 2 to 7 days. All interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed by researcher.

At the start of the first interview, the researcher gave each participant a copy of the informed consent (Appendix D) and asked the participant to follow as researcher read the consent aloud. The researcher then asked the participant if she had any questions and if she wanted to proceed with the interview. All of the participants agreed to proceed at this time. Participants were then asked to sign two copies of the informed consent. One of the copies was given to the participant to keep for her own records, while the other was kept in the researcher’s locked cabinet, together with the other research materials. (After the first interview, one participant chose to discontinue participation in the study, stating, "I am not used to talking about myself" and indicating that she was uncomfortable doing so. The researcher
offered to process any feelings and thoughts she had about her participation, but the participant declined, saying it was not necessary. The researcher thanked her for her participation, and the interview was discontinued. Another participant found herself unable to answer parts of the interview because it related to severe trauma in her past. Nevertheless, she wanted to continue with the interview and she completed both interviews. Because many parts of her data were absent, the data from this participant were not included in the final analysis.)

After signing the informed consent, participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) requesting the following: name, age, address, telephone, education, occupation, employment, marital status, children, race, ethnicity, religion, and church membership and involvement.

The first interview then proceeded using a General Interview Guide approach (Patton, 1990), which required the outlining of a set of issues to be explored with each subject. This method ensured a certain measure of reliability across participants by systematically inquiring into topic areas the researcher had selected for all participants to consider. This method also preserved the interviewer’s freedom to build conversations within certain subject areas, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style (Patton, 1990). The following topic areas composed the outline of the first interview (see Appendix F: Developmental History): place and date of birth, family structure and key memories of childhood and adolescence, memories of religion and religious history, school experiences, significant relationships, personal and professional goals, and a picture of family and self accompanied by verbal description of family and self.
At the end of the first interview, participants were asked if they had any questions and/or comments. The researcher then thanked the participants for their time and participation in the first interview and the second interview was confirmed.

The second interview commenced, again using the abovementioned General Interview Guide approach (Patton, 1990). The questions (Appendix G) focused on the participant’s God representation, in particular as it related to life events and change, emotions and creativity, thinking and decision making, and self-image.

Following the focus questions, the interviewer asked participants to listen to three short stories (Appendix H) and to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas after each story. Participants expressed their thoughts and feelings in reaction to the experience of the women in the stories. Participants were also asked to put themselves in the women’s place and talk about what they would do in their situation.

Following the three short stories, participants were given an opportunity to comment on or add to the interviews. The researcher had an opportunity to clarify any points and to check on any preliminary ideas that participants stated. The participants were then personally thanked for their participation and a thank you letter (Appendix I) was later sent. Interviews with participants lasted between 2½ and 5 hours. Immediately following each interview, the researcher wrote her research notes containing any thoughts, feelings, and ideas generated during the interview. The interview process yielded approximately 34 hours of taped conversation, 340 pages of typed transcripts, and 12 pages of postinterview notes, as well as the information provided by the participants’ demographic questionnaires.

The first interview with the first participant allowed the researcher to assess that the interview could be conducted within the planned time, that the sequence of the questions appeared comfortable for the participant, and that the questions
generated enough information about the subject in question. Based on this assessment, no changes were made in the interview format and content.

Data Analysis Procedures

The purpose of this study was to explore the common themes and relationships between a woman's internal representations of God and her use of that representation in the service of creating (i.e., developing who one is) and recreating (i.e., integrating new and old aspects) the self. Consistent with the qualitative assumption that there are common threads or "essences" to shared experience (Patton, 1990), coding and thematic content analysis were conducted in order to identify common themes. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggested that "coding is a way of developing and refining interpretations of the data. The coding process involves bringing together and analyzing all the data bearing on major themes, ideas, concepts, interpretations, and propositions" (p. 150).

The data were coded with the aid of the fourth revision of Qualitative Solutions and Research's Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUD*IST) computer software.

Analytic memos were also used throughout the data collection process. These memos gave the researcher an opportunity to reflect on particular aspects of the participants' responses and served as a record of the researcher's tentative ideas about themes and meanings. These memos were a crucial part of the initial process of coding and data reduction.

Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Van Kaam (1966) method of analysis of phenomenological data was used as the model of analysis for this research. In
accordance with this method, the complete transcriptions of each participant’s interviews were analyzed in the following manner:

1. Listing and Preliminary Grouping: Every expression considered relevant to the development and function of the God representation was listed. This is a process referred to as “horizontalization.”

2. Reduction and Elimination: At this stage each of the above listed expressions is tested to see if it meets two requirements: (1) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it? and (2) Is it possible to abstract it and label it? Statements that meet these requirements are referred by Moustakas (1994) as “horizons of the experience.” The expressions that did not meet these requirements were eliminated from the analysis. The “horizons” that remained were termed the invariant constituents of the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents: The invariant constituents that were related were clustered into a thematic label. Four such themes emerged from the data of this present research: Early Relational Experiences, Early God Representation/Religious Experiences, Present God Representation, and Relational Dynamics of Self and Other.

4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application—Validation: The invariant constituents and their accompanying themes were checked to see if (a) they were expressed explicitly in the complete transcription, or (b) they were at least compatible.

5. Individual Textural Description: Based on the final invariant constituents and themes, an Individual Textural Description of the experience was constructed for
each participant. This was essentially a synthesis of the final invariant themes and constituents and included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews.

6. Individual Structural Description: Based on the Individual Textural Description and combining it with what Moustakas (1994) calls “Imaginative Variation,” an Individual Structural Description was constructed for each participant. As defined by Moustakas, the Individual Structural Description involves possible meanings through the utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from different perspectives, positions, roles, or functions. The aim is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced . . .” (p. 98)

7. Textural-Structural Description: A Textural-Structural Description was then developed for each participant. It incorporated the meanings and essences of the experience and the invariant constituents and themes.

8. Composite Description: From the individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience was developed, which represented and was applicable to the group of participants as a whole.

The above method of analysis provided an effective method to examine each individual participant’s experience related to the God representation and helped to generate themes that related to the group of participants as a whole.

In addition to the generation of themes, which reflected the experience of the women with regard to their God representation, the analysis identified two separate participant groups. The two groups are outlined and discussed in Chapter V.

The four themes are used as the organizational structure in Chapter IV. Chapter V outlines the invariant constituents that generated the four themes, presents
the two emergent groups, and synthesizes the themes into a final interpretation of the data: the Composite Descriptions.

The coding and interpretation processes were conducted by the researcher alone without outside participation. Therefore, the results reflect only the researcher’s perceptions and interpretations of the participants’ statements. Every effort was made to describe the women’s experiences as accurately as possible, and clarification and confirmation of emergent themes was sought throughout the interviews.

The Rigor of the Data Analysis

In quantitative research, four concepts apply to the rigor or trustworthiness of the data: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Lincoln and Guba (1985), although finding these concepts inappropriate for naturalistic or qualitative inquiry, suggested four qualitative research concepts as analogs to the four quantitative concepts listed above. They suggested credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity. In the present research, several methods were employed to ensure the qualitative criteria for rigor suggested by Lincoln and Guba.

Credibility: This concept relates to how credible the particular findings of the study are and what criteria are used to judge it. Lincoln and Guba (1985) spoke of the need for the researcher to be involved in “activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced” (p. 301). They also referred to this as “prolonged engagement,” and “lengthy and intensive contact” (p. 301). In the present research, the length and depth of the contact is considered by the researcher an aid to credibility. Each participant was interviewed for as long as a total of 5 hours.
Marshall and Rossman (1995) added that “an in-depth description showing the complexities of variables and interactions will be so embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid” (p.143). Within the present study, care was taken to state clearly the parameters of the research setting, population, and theoretical framework and to present the data directly out of the participant’s voice.

**Transferability:** This concept refers to how transferable the findings are to another setting or group of people. According to Lincoln and Guba (1995), the task of demonstrating the applicability of the findings from one setting to another rests with the researcher who would make that transfer, not the original researcher. In this research, “thick descriptions,” as suggested by Moustakas (1994), were used. This involves describing in detail the participants, the setting, and the concepts and models guiding the research, which enables another researcher to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Moustakas, 1994, p. 204).

**Dependability and Confirmability:** These concepts refer to whether the researcher can be reasonably sure that the findings would be replicated if the research were conducted again with the same participants in the same context, so there is certainty that the findings are free of researcher bias and are reflective of the participants’ views. According to Marshall and Rossman (1995), the dependability concept assumes “an unchanging universe where inquiry could, quite logically, be replicated” (p. 145). This contrasts with the qualitative assumption that the social world is constantly changing and being constructed so that the concept of replication is rendered problematic. Nevertheless, the researcher in this study took appropriate measures to assure that the natural subjectivity of the researcher would not shape the findings. These measures included: checking with participants for clarity and
confirmation of initial hypotheses, checking and rechecking the data for negative instances and rival hypotheses, keeping researcher notes regarding data and analyses procedures and decisions, and making evident from the use of the raw data the connection between the findings and the real world (i.e., direct excerpts from data, graphs, and charts).
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Sometimes we come upon the footprints
"where bright angel feet have trod,"
and sometimes, in especially blessed moments,
if we listen carefully to their stories,
if we watch them go about their days,
we see our own sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles,
teachers and strangers, clothed like the mountains with glory,
held in life forever in the memories of God.
—Roberta C. Bondi

Overview

This chapter presents the results of the two interviews with each of the final 10 research participants. For each participant, the findings are organized into the four themes of Early Relational Experiences, Early God Representations/Religious Experiences, Present God Representation, and Relational Dynamics of Self and Other. With 6 participants, the two interviews were conducted on the same day with a 20–30 minute break between the first and second parts. With the other 4 participants, the two interviews were separated by 2 to 7 days. Each participant was asked all the questions contained within the interview guide (Appendices E, F, G, and H), although the order of the questions sometimes varied according to the researcher’s judgment. The second interview provided the opportunity to clarify connections and emerging themes as the life history of each participant was united with the history and dynamics of the God representation. Sometimes participants were aware of the connection between their relational histories and their God
representation, but sometimes they were not. The depth and intentionality of the questions in the second interview were designed to aid the process of looking at the relational history in conjunction with the God representation and to provide numerous accounts of the same occurrences as a way of checking with each participant regarding the accuracy of the correlations and any themes that developed.

In the presentation of results, some of the identified themes overlap and interconnect; therefore, while certain quotes have been categorized under one particular theme, a specific idea or story may seem equally relevant to another theme. This overlap and interconnectedness form the essence of the composite descriptions established later and discussed in Chapter V.

Alicia

Alicia is 30 years old, Caucasian, married, and a mother of four. She is employed full-time in an office position and is a high school graduate with a 2-year technical degree. She is a member of a Protestant church, although she is not sure she identifies fully with that particular religion at this time. Although she grew up in this church, during her adolescent and young adult years she did not attend. She began attending once again when her first son was born in 1991. Alicia stated that she is presently searching for a different church community and that she is not sure where she would like to go. Her mother began to attend this church after her father died and attended there with the children until they reached adolescence. Alicia stated, “I think it was too much of a fight to get all her teenage kids to go to church, so she just quit going, too.”

Alicia stated that “the interview made me think about things I hadn’t thought about before . . . I enjoyed talking with you . . . I have a lot to think about now.”
Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Alicia stated that she grew up with her mother and two brothers. Her father had been divorced prior to marrying her mother and had two daughters and one son from his previous marriage. When she was 18 months old, her father died suddenly of asphyxiation while on a fishing house, and her mother never remarried. Alicia stated that she has no memories of her father.

Her earliest memories are of “growing up in a trailer house and that we were really poor. I don’t remember having anybody really close to me.” Alicia went on to share that her mother was always angry and that she was verbally and physically abusive. She said, “She was mean and always angry, and always yelling. She was abusive to my brothers. She was verbally abusive to all of us, but physically abusive to my brothers.” She added:

I just remember being yelled at a lot... she wasn’t a nice mother; she really wasn’t. She yelled a lot and I remember she had this razor strap like this; it had probably about an inch, an inch and one half wide by probably 18 inches, and it had a leather string on it, kind of like a leather shoe string on it with a knot at the end that she would hang on the wall, and then it had a piece of metal in it that she would take after me... she never beat me though... she beat my brothers pretty bad. I remember her taking brooms after and breaking broom handles on my brothers and breaking wooden spoons on my brothers and I don’t ever remember her hitting me though. She yelled a lot and cussed a lot and degraded us a lot.

One of her brothers was sent away to live with another family. Later, when he was 16 or 17, Alicia explained, “My mom sent him off to the army... she signed him away and said take him... shaped him up though, he came back a bigger and better man... it made him grow up fast...”

Alicia stated she did not feel close to anyone, and that although there were sporadic visits to uncles and aunts and grandparents, there were no emotional ties to any of them. She described her maternal grandmother as a “crabby woman.” She did
speak of a family who befriended her family and paid for her and her brothers to go to a Christian school until she completed ninth grade. She stated:

I think she [the mother] was a strong part of my life because she paid for my piano lessons also and I went once a week with her daughter, and I got to stay overnight at their house every Wednesday night and go to school together the next day. After we went to public school, most of the contact dropped. I think they were hurt because my mom kind of took us out.

She added, “I wrote them a letter once and never got a response.”

Alicia described her time at the Christian school as not very positive. She said:

I remember being picked on a lot because we were really poor . . . being a poor person at this school wasn’t nice . . . you can’t be a poor person there . . . because you get picked on a lot . . . you know, no matter how people try and keep things hush, hush about your finances, everybody knew how poor we were and everybody knew by the clothes we wore.

She also talked about

my 1st and 2nd grade teacher, who was just a nasty, nasty lady and she used to lock bad kids. She would teach in this basement and she used to lock my brother in the furnace room by the women’s bathroom for punishment. My 3rd and 4th grade teacher was a wonderful lady . . . she is still teaching there . . . I really like and admire her. I also remember another teacher, Mr. Smith . . . I don’t know why I remember him . . . I just liked him . . . he was a male role model or something . . .

She then talked about her experience at the public school she attended: “It was a rude awakening . . . of real life. Being introduced to drugs and alcohol and the party scene. More accepting though because you find a niche that is your own . . .”

She talked about “making very poor decisions after I went to public school. I started drinking, smoking, and partying a lot with my friends, and going out and drinking and driving . . . it is a miracle that I am still alive, actually.” She left home at the age of 17 to live with her boyfriend, who is now her husband.
Theme Two: Early God Representations/Religious Experiences

Alicia stated:

I don’t know if I even had an image of God . . . I know I had an image of Jesus and I always remember the flannel pictures that they had in school of Him wearing this golden crown with His arms outstretched wide with a big smile on His face and a beard and a mustache and the dark hair down to His shoulders and the golden city behind Him, and the children kind of going in a line behind Him with light gowns on and everybody had a crown on. I think that was probably in 2nd or 3rd grade . . . I think we were in Bible class and learning about Jesus and an all-forgiving Jesus . . .

Alicia remembered going to church and the different programs she attended:

I remember the choir robes and the programs that we put on, the nervousness of it all . . . you know, being a kid and being up in front and all the audience and congregation, you know, the butterflies with singing with a big group and the excitement of doing a good job . . . and I remember the youth groups, the ceramics classes . . . the mother of my friend was the leader of that group.

She added, “I remember feeling like you had to do all the right things in order to be accepted . . . I never quite felt like I was good enough . . .” Concerning experiences with clergy she said:

We never had a relationship with a pastor . . . I remember the pastor that baptized me, and I think the only reason I remember him was because I have a picture of him and myself at my baptism, but I don’t even remember his name.

Alicia stated that there were no religious practices at home.

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Alicia spoke of a God who is loving but who is also a judge. She sees God as judging each person and the world. God might be merciful depending on whether the individual is “repentant enough.” God might also have an intermediary such as Jesus, so that his punishment and anger might be modulated. Alicia explained it this way:
He is a God who is caring and loving and forgiving but also fair and judgmental. Those who do evil will receive evil, those who do good will receive good, I guess. He will judge those. He will judge everybody, good and evil. And I see him as a very forgiving God for those who are sincerely repentant.

When talking about God's relationship to the world, Alicia described God as Overseer. I would think Jesus is the intermediary, I think that is how I see it. I see Jesus as more the forgiving person. I see Jesus more of a person to, you know, God saying, God more of a judge, like, "Okay, this is what you did and this is your consequence" and Jesus saying, "Oh, God, come on, you know she is really sorry... give her a break," kind of. But God saying, "Nope, you did it this way and this is your consequence."

Alicia spoke of her guilt and her uncertainty about God's understanding toward her:

In my heart I feel that I should spend more time with Him because I think He wants to know us. I would like a close relationship with God. Being able to be awake and coherent enough to pray without falling asleep in the middle of my prayer, which happens quite a lot of times because I pray in bed. I don't get down on my hands and knees and pray, which would probably keep me awake if I was on my knees, but I don't. I pray in bed and then talking to Him and all of a sudden the baby wakes up and I am thinking, when did I fall asleep here in my conversation with God? and being able to sit down in a peaceful, quiet house and being able to read the Bible without going... "Okay, now where was I in the Bible?" That would be my relationship with God... and being able to feel His presence and Him speaking to me... I guess... people say He speaks to them... not out loud of course, but people say, "You know I really felt impressed by God wanting me to do this"... and I don't know if I have ever felt that, if I have felt that strong of an impression from Him... His presence...

She added that God probably saw her as a frazzled mother who has no time in her hands... and I think He is an understanding God though... at least I hope He is understanding... I am hoping He is... you know, maybe I am not so sure because maybe somehow I could organize my life better so I could spend more time with Him and maybe He doesn't understand why I do not spend hours with Him or even an hour or 5 minutes or 10 minutes. Maybe He doesn't understand... maybe He's up there saying, "You know, you could organize your life a little bit..."
better this way, and why haven’t you figured it out yet, so you can spend
more time with me?” . . . I don’t know; I am not sure how He is . . .

Despite the fact that Alicia described at times a God of love, forgiveness, and
care, she seemed to carry a God who does not have much empathy and who is not
very involved in her life other than to require that she spend more time praying and
reading the Bible. She said:

I don’t expect anything from Him because I think it is my job to please Him,
not the other way around . . . I think He expects us to provide for ourselves. I
mean, we . . . He will help you and He will guide you, but you cannot just
throw up your hands and say, “God find me a job; God find me a house,” and
just sit there and not look in the paper and not look, just sit there and make
any effort on your part whatsoever.

Despite stating that she does not expect anything from God, Alicia said at another
point that when she is confused or sad,

talking to Him is the first thing. I say, “God, this is . . . I need your help . . . I
can’t” . . . I have done that before when I have been at my most frazzled times
with the kids. I have said, “I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this” . . .
and it seems to help, talking to Him about it.

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Alicia described herself as a

happy, energetic gal . . . a working wife and a mother of four . . . I don’t
know how else to describe myself . . . a clean person . . . and the only reason I
think I am that way is because my mom was not . . . never . . . she had a dirty
house.

In her drawing of herself, Alicia focused on physical aspects, wishing aloud that her
“body would not show she’s had four children.” Alicia would like to study to become
a nurse midwife in the future, but stated it probably will not happen because of having
four children.
Alicia has been married for 8 years. Her first son was almost a year old when she got married. She stated she is happy in the relationship with her husband and gives him the credit for her no longer drinking heavily and smoking. She said:

I stopped all that when I met my husband. We went to a postsecondary option in public school. When you are in 11th or 12th grade you get to take college courses and the public school pays for it, so we both took this medical occupations class and we started dating and he found out I was drinking and smoking and said he did not want a girlfriend that did that so I quit doing it because I wanted to go out with him . . . He was actually the first boyfriend that I actually ever had . . . I never really had a significant boyfriend before then. At first he didn’t want anything to do with me; it was a challenge I think . . . you know how you are in puberty . . . too afraid to ask someone . . . so, you ask your friends . . . my friends would always come back and say, “Nope, he doesn’t want anything to do with you; he thinks you are obnoxious and doesn’t want anything to do with you” . . . and then probably 8 weeks later, he asked me out on a date . . . and ever since then, we have been a couple. I was 17 years old then.

In discussing her husband, she said she wished he was more assertive and not as passive, but she laughed saying that then “he probably would not be with me.”

Alicia’s main focus is her children. She described what she likes to do:

Going to the park with my . . . yard apes and just being a kid and the nice cool green grass, a picnic with my husband and just family time and just enjoying being with my kids, just the warm fuzzies of being a nice, warm, close family. Because I didn’t grow up with that so I enjoy it now, just from a different perspective. As the nurturer instead of being nurtured.

She added:

Your life changes when you become a parent because you view the world so differently, you know, you know you think about wars differently in other countries, and moms caring for their dying children in these wars and not being able to feed them, watching their children die, oh, it is just overwhelming . . . something in your body, in your heart, and in your mind just changes when you become a mother.

She continued:

My life has been turned upside down in 9 years and I never imagined myself a mother before, never. I wouldn’t trade it for the world, even how
overwhelming it is at times but, you know, I just think about some day in about 9 years one of them is going to be out of the house, on his way out, and he has already been with me 9 years and I blinked and he is already 9. I just stop and think in 9 years one of them is going to be out, and then after that they are all going to be one right after the other out of my house, then I am just sitting there and now what do I do? I have already cleaned my house, no one is coming behind me to mess it up now... so...

Alicia stated she does not have any close friends and that she “never had a real close friend.” She maintains a very strained relationship with her mother and of that relationship she said, “I don’t think I am strong enough to tell her to go fly a kite... I just think I am too weak to hurt her... and I think it would hurt her.” She maintains sporadic contact with her brothers and with her husband’s family.

Alicia presented a very straightforward and self-reliant way of dealing with decisions or difficult situations. She makes choices based on “what is right or wrong” and speaks of just “doing what one needs to do, regardless of feelings or anything else.” Concerning her decision to have her baby when she was not married and became pregnant at the age of 19, she explained:

We talked about it, but I told him I wasn’t interested in pursuing an abortion... I just figured, we got ourselves into this mess we will get ourselves out, and if you won’t do it with me, I will do it on my own. I will make my own... mom did it on her own, I can do it on my own if you are not with me. I was lucky enough to... I mean... he decided to do it with me.

When talking about facing a difficult task, Alicia said, “I face it head on and deal with it... just do it.” To the three different life scenarios/dilemmas the researcher presented in the interview, Alicia had similar responses:

I guess I would say if her husband is not open to reconciliation and dropping the 30-year-old girl, then get over it and move on and buck up, get a job, move out, get your own apartment, get on with life... I would get out of there and drop him like a hot potato and say, “Get lost,” and do what I had to do to make it on my own. I would say, “Get lost baby.”

At another point, responding to the second story, she said:
She should say, “Screw you. This is the way I am; if you don’t like it, there’s the door. This is the way I am; this is the way I am raising my kids; if you don’t like it, don’t come see us.”

She added that she confronted her father-in-law in a similar way because he used to make fun of her and joke about her parenting:

I told him I am not having it that way and I think that is what she should do. “This is the way I am and if you don’t like it, too bad, baby” . . . I think she should cough up an attitude. I would tell her to grow a spine, don’t be so passive. Get up there and stand up for yourself. Who cares what they think?

Alicia dealt with the third scenario in a similar manner, as she encountered the dilemma of someone faced with the possibility of an abortion:

I would have to say, “You know, I am sorry, but you can’t take this innocent life; you have to deal with it.” She could die, but her children would still have a dad. Granted they would be without a mom, but they would get over it . . . they wouldn’t get over it, but they would deal with it, you know, just deal with it . . . “You don’t have a mom anymore; just deal with it.”

Alicia spoke very little of her feelings. In fact, at different points during the interview, she spoke of “never thinking about these things” and not “spending time considering how I feel.” She seems to have learned to “just do life.” She added, “I am constantly doing something . . . I don’t like to stop and think . . . I have a lot of energy.” Her children seem to be her connection to emotions, as she feels deeply for them. They seem to help her connect with the world at large. In one instance, she spoke of feeling deeply about her realization for the first time that Jesus loved her:

About 3 years ago when I started questioning my faith, I remember it so distinctly . . . I was on my way to work . . . and I remember just thinking about Jesus, and grace . . . and I remember just breaking down in tears and crying my whole way to work because it finally hit me that He loved me even if I couldn’t keep all the rules . . . I think that’s the closest I ever felt to Him . . . I think I felt the Holy Spirit surrounding me with love and saying, “You are okay” . . .
Alicia’s drawings were marked by images of happiness and people “smiling.” When talking about her self-drawing, she focused on her children and seemed conscious of her body image. She talked of “being a happy gal.” When talking about her family drawing, Alicia became aware of how incongruent her drawing was with the reality of her growing-up years. She drew all people smiling, while she talked about memories of neglect and physical and emotional abuse. She stated, “I guess that is how I want to see it.” Her drawing of God generated an image of God with “open arms” and someone “happy to see me.” She imagined God saying, “Come home. I have missed you.”

Beth

Beth is 36 years old, Caucasian, married, a mother of three, and a homemaker. Although she attended college for 3½ years pursuing a nursing degree, she dropped out before completion. She has been a member of a Protestant church for 8 years and is very involved in church activities. She was raised a Catholic and has attended several other churches through the years “in search of the truth.”

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Beth grew up with her mother and father and five siblings. She is the second in the line of children. A brother 2 years her senior died in a drowning accident on their own property when she was 1 year old. She said:

I don’t remember the accident . . . just the people who came . . . sitting in my grandfather’s lap . . . my mother felt tremendous guilt over this . . . she felt it was her fault because she was in the yard and she didn’t see it . . . I don’t think she has forgiven herself.

This is her parents’ first and only marriage and they presently remain married.
She described her father as a

people person, happy, optimistic, cheerful, cordial, and yet he is rather laid back, he doesn’t expect, when I say cordial, I don’t mean prim and proper style, I mean you feel comfortable with him. My dad is more open in some ways than my mother. For example, he came to my baptism at the church I am attending now, but my mom would not come.

She added:

My dad, on the other hand, has been with me through it all... all these questioning times... and I even... when I went to college I went through a period of rebellion, too... and I went out on my own... and my dad still loved me... [laughter]... he was there.

She described her mother as

a little more reserved than me... I suppose she’s a lot... pretty similar because people tell me that I take after my mom in looks anyway. I think she is... ah... she likes animals, she likes gardening, she is not musical... and she can sing, but she... I couldn’t see her just singing openly in front of everybody. She was a nurse and that is why I was encouraged to go into nursing, too. I wanted to go into music and theater, but my dad said... “The only thing you will be able to do is become a teacher. Is that what you want to do... just teach music?” On the other hand, they are screaming for nurses right now... there will always be a job in nursing... and so I went into nursing... all I wanted to do is please my dad... I wanted to please my teachers... in a good way...

Beth added that her mother “is religious, very religious... very dutiful in following the steps, in praying her rosary, in going to confession...” At another point she said:

There was not a lot of rules...’cause I remember feeling like she was always mad at me... because she didn’t discipline me... instead she... it was this guilt... sort of unspoken disapproval... and because she didn’t discipline me... it never went away... I never could be released from it...

Nevertheless, she talked about “confiding in my mom, if I was having any troubles in school or, you know, wondering about how my friends or whatever... I wouldn’t hide those things from my mom.”
Some of Beth’s family memories include

being all gathered around the couch and we would all be snuggled up real tight and maybe one brother would have his legs out. We were just really close and affectionate. Real jokesters at the time. I remember watching “Little House on the Prairie” . . . that was one of our favorite programs . . . Mom and Dad would be there even if they were not watching . . . and it is just nice to know, even though we weren’t necessarily talking to each other, everybody was there; it was cozy. I don’t think about where I am in the picture . . . just that I am right in there with the bunch. Another one I remember, this was a typical one, we often would sit down and talk or watch television . . . also, we had family gatherings and we would be around the volleyball net . . . I also remember my sister and I at the piano practicing . . .

Beth stated she feels closest to her sister. She said:

I remember [laughing], if you can’t beat them, join them. Because, you know, we went through our little siblings’ squabbles and we reached an age where I just thought, “Why not get it together?” [laughing] and I said, “Hey, why don’t we share bedrooms?” and then we did some rearranging and she shared my bedroom and we ended up sharing clothes and we had similar friends in school, similar interests. In high school, we were both in the choir and drama, theater, plays and things and ah . . . musical things and she and I both loved to play piano so we took piano lessons together . . . and we, because we hung around with sort of the musical and theater crowd, we had similar friends . . .

She also remembered grandparents on both sides of the family and going
to stay with my paternal grandparents for a couple of weeks in the summer. My siblings would, too, but we would take turns, just a special time with Grandma and Grandpa and my aunt. She was still living at home; she was actually a year or two older than me, so it was kind of like I felt she was my cousin rather than my aunt.

Beth attended public school and stated she “really enjoyed being involved in the choir, musical plays and . . . I was in a special select group of the choir . . . certain kids tried out and auditioned . . . so it’s kind of special.” When discussing relationships with teachers, Beth said:

Well, I don’t know if it would be fair to say that I was a teacher’s pet, but I do know that I got along very well with the teachers . . . I had good grades . . . And I enjoyed learning . . . I felt they liked me and I liked them.
Regarding friends and peer relationships, Beth spoke of a mixed experience:

I had a group, a friendship group which was like our theater and music crowd . . . and I had gotten a lead role in this play, and a girl who I thought was my best friend wasn’t speaking to me because she felt she should have that lead part . . . and she said, she told so and so to tell me . . . [laughing] . . . it was very immature . . . That she would not speak to me again unless I forfeited my role, because it wasn’t Christian of me to take this role . . . when there were others that should get a turn . . . so I even . . . I considered what she said. I went to the teacher that was in charge of the play, the director, and I asked him . . . “What do you think? . . . I can let somebody else have a turn; that’s fine with me” . . . he said, “No! I chose you because I wanted you, because you are the right person for this part and you can do it the best . . . and this girl, I wouldn’t have picked her anyway, even if you hadn’t tried out . . . she wouldn’t have been able to do it” . . . anyway . . . so I didn’t forfeit the part . . . but she was kind of influential in this group and she got the whole group not speaking to me . . . [laughing] . . . I would sit at the meal table and I remember them talking about someone . . . and joking and laughing about this person . . . but I knew they were talking about me . . . they were doing it right in front of me . . . that’s when I became depressed . . . my boyfriend had gone to college . . . and I didn’t have my support system . . . that was also when my older brother who was in college was also having troubles . . . he got involved with the wrong people and he was on drugs . . . he would come home and I felt scared . . . eventually my parents sent him to de-tox.

Beth went on to say:

I wasn’t with the popular crowd, so to speak, I tried not to . . . I didn’t want to be in a clique; I wanted to be friends with everybody . . . the popular people as well as those who were not . . . maybe misfits, if you will . . . I wanted them to know they were accepted, too. I remember one time a teacher asked me, there was a group of kids that came, they were called boat people, they were refugees and there was a lot of fighting going on in Vietnam and they came in seeking refugee. It was political asylum and there was a gal who came to class and she was just beside herself in this strange new world; she didn’t know the language at all, not a single word of English, and one of the teachers asked me if I would kind of befriend her and make sure she got to classes and try to communicate with her if at all possible to make her feel comfortable. I asked the teacher, “Why did you pick me?” And the teacher said . . . she didn’t say a lot . . . she didn’t really praise me or anything like that, which is good because it was wiser not to do that, but she just said that she thought that I was the kind of person that would enjoy doing that for somebody else, and that was true . . . I wanted to be helpful.

Beth continued with a similar story:
I remember another gal who had no friends really that I could see, and she had a deformed hand. She had dark colored skin, I don't know what race she was but she was terribly picked on by the people... some of the in-crowd just thought she was yak. And I made a point to be cheerful; I wanted her to know that she was okay, that I could be her friend. I remember it was Christmas time and everyone was the choosing their little secret Santas... so everyone was exchanging names to have secret pals... and, of course, they didn't even ask her if she wanted to be involved. So without telling her I told the group, I said, "That's okay, I am not going to be part of it this time"... and I took her on as my secret pal. I put little special notes in her locker, and she had long hair but she really did not know what to do with it. So I bought her some little hair clip things and just so that she could know that she could be pretty and just something that would encourage her, and then she broke her leg and I carried her books to her class for her and it was a really good experience for me because I got no reward for doing it or anything.

At another point, Beth stated:

I remember talking to a gal just in passing in the hallway... she was a friend of mine... she said, What's going on?"... I said, "I just think nobody likes me"... probably I had just passed one of the other people and she said, "You know, I hear you say that, but it's just not true." And that affected me... I stopped to think about it... there were other people that liked me... yes, this crowd, this little group was jealous, they were going through their thing, and I think they saw the light later, but it wasn't true... I think I was liked and I liked people, you know...

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

Beth stated that her first ideas about God were "scary." She said:

My thoughts were kind of far off... I was told that heaven was when you go float on a cloud and you're like a naked cherub and you play a harp... [laughter]... and I remember feeling that God was this stern judge up there and you better watch out... and... a stern God... God is this stern judge... you better obey him or else...

At another time she said, "I think that's the God of my mom, the judge, guilt..."

She also added:

I remember feeling that God stayed mad... you go to confession, ask forgiveness, then go back next week and ask forgiveness for the same thing... somehow God stayed mad. I think I wanted to please Him a little bit out
of fear... better do what's right or God will be mad... I remember one time telling... I don't know... around the ages of 6 and 9... somewhere in there... one day I didn't want to go to church and I told my mom that I didn't feel good... "I have a tummy ache"... she told me, "You better stay home"... and I got to stay home and I felt so guilty after the car drove off and I felt so badly about it, that I actually worked myself into a stomach ache... I remember telling my mom... I just couldn't live that lie... when she got home I had to tell her and ask her, "What can I do? I really wasn't sick and now I feel sick," and I remember she said, "Offer your sickness to God" and that satisfied me at the time, but I remember praying to God to forgive me... and I remember feeling that God stayed mad...

Beth said she also remembered

my dad sitting down with me and going through these books... they were something put out by the Catholic Church. I remember him showing me pictures of bright angels... and going through a kindergarten type of... I don't remember if the Bible was there or not... it was just stories about the Bible. I remember doing that and that it seemed important to my dad... he was getting me ready for my first communion... you know...

She added:

We always prayed before meals, and when we were younger I remember having prayer at family worship time, right before bed, just once a day... but it didn't last. We didn't continue that. But my parents always went to church... we were regular attendees and did all the required things. Going to penance and confession and on holy days you were supposed to go to church and get the ashes on your forehead and all the rituals.

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Beth saw God as very interested in behavior and in controlling and changing certain aspects of her life. Her focus was on listening to what might need changing, for God was certain to reveal that, and then working to implement the change.

Beth talked about how her God has changed from a stern, judging God to a loving, accepting one. Nevertheless, her God was focused on changing her, her behavior, and this aspect seemed to be at the core of her relationship with her God.

When asked about her relationship with God and God's role in her life, Beth stated:
Well... His main activity is helping me to grow and develop just as I try to help my children... I guess... I think He works on my character... He points out things to me, but in a gentle way... I think I used to see Him as blaming and shaming... but now I see Him more as pointing things out to me without ridiculing me... because I think that's how I used to treat myself... ah... "You did it again... kick yourself"... wherever... I don't see Him like that anymore...

When asked about a time when she felt closest to God, Beth responded by describing an incident in which she felt God spoke to her through the testimonies of other people to help her pay attention to changes needed in the areas of health and exercise:

The most recent time I felt close to God was when my church selected me to go attend a seminar in another state. I feel that... yes... the church selected me to go down... but I feel God selected me... and... I also felt that there was so much more reason that God sent me there than just the program... I felt there were certain things in my character that He pointed out to me... that nobody could have known... and He pointed them out through people... through things they said to me... through stories that were related... I just felt the touch of God... and I perceived... "Okay, now I can see why you brought me here"... [laughter]... He wanted to show me these certain things... there was a lady there that shared with me her personal testimony... how God had worked in her life... in one area of her health... and it was an area of my health I have been excusing... and I felt that God was using her... and she didn’t know... it came up not once, but it came up again later... first in a conversation with her and when she got up to tell her testimony... she told me a story and she got up and told another story about someone else... and... I knew God was speaking to me... and... I actually went to her afterwards and I thanked her... and I gave her a hug... and I said... "I know God is telling me what I need to do"... she said... "Oh... I didn’t mean it for you... I didn’t mean to be pointing the finger at you"... "I know you didn’t, but I know God was"... [laughter].

Beth went on to explain how God wanted her to "have victory over two health issues: not eating large meals in the evening and exercising more." Beth also talked about other times in her life when God intervened directly to change an aspect of her behavior. In college she started living with her boyfriend and felt very distant
from God, because "I was living in sin." She described praying to God one day and shortly after she had this experience:

I don't know where this book came from . . . someone had shared it with me . . . probably a year before that . . . before I even got in this mess . . . it was a Christian book . . . and in that book . . . written by a woman . . . and she put the prodigal son story from her perspective . . . and she talked about her own experience first of all . . . she put the prodigal son's story in modern day terms . . . and then she talked about a gal that read her book and realized she was wrong and moved out . . . as soon as she realized she was wrong she did what she needed to do . . . and I felt very strongly . . . that's what God wanted me to do . . . so . . . I started going back to the Bible . . . my boyfriend came home . . . "What's going on?" . . . he didn't know . . . it happened so quickly . . . I read this book . . . maybe for a couple of days . . . if that . . . and I just knew I had to move out . . . I said . . . "I have to go" . . .

Beth also spoke about how God answers and provides for her:

He answers prayer . . . definitely . . . I remember not that long ago . . . that we prayed that He would find a home in the country for us and now we have it . . . [laughter] . . . we thought, "It's never gonna happen . . . this is really never gonna happen . . . how long, oh Lord?" . . . and . . . but . . . now . . . here we are . . . we're in the country . . . we have a home of our own, in a nice spot, and also the situation at that program I went to and there is many others . . . but . . . those people didn't know . . . and yet certain topics came up again and again . . . the prodigal son story book . . . back when I was in that situation, that book happened to come by . . . those are things only God could have known . . .

She added, "I trust in Him and continue to yield my will to His will . . . He is a Savior, Friend, Wonderful Counselor."

Beth described her picture of God in the following ways:

I saw a picture one time . . . that I really liked . . . I don’t remember if it was in one of the children’s books or not . . . it’s like the verandah of a house and it’s a very bright sunny day . . . it’s bright and cheerful and there are trees, birds, and maybe the heavenly city in the background . . . this is the city . . . the golden city, lovely nature, pretty and happy and then there is this man, a fatherly looking gentleman, clean and white, nice white clothing, similar to Jesus and I can’t draw the face real well, but there’s a twinkle in the eye . . . and a smile . . . I can’t think of any other way to describe it . . . strong, but kind hands . . . walking up the steps . . . toward this house; I don’t know
whose house it is, maybe it's my house or something... it seems like a perfect picture of God... [laughter]...

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics: Self and Others

Beth described herself as a “wife and mother.” She added:

I’m a light kind of person... I think I am serious sometimes, too... I am curious... I want to know more... I think I am intelligent enough that I... I don’t want answers... that take away the power... I always had to have my questions satisfied, you know.

She continued:

I like music, I enjoy singing, and I am interested in health... nutrition... I am conscientious, maybe overly conscientious... always wanted to do the right thing. Like I said before, I wanted to please my parents, I wanted to please my teachers, I always wanted to do what was right, the right thing, and so that is all I meant really.

When describing a drawing of herself, Beth stated:

I would have to say the most way I see myself now is parenting, working with my children... I enjoy teaching them... watching their lives unfold, helping them through their struggles in life... just the same things that I went through, we all go through... getting old, getting along... and I see myself now, my arms around them, teaching them but also around them in the kitchen having a good time learning how to make something or putting things in the blender... I enjoy working outdoors with them and my husband is there, too, and... this is the bulk of my day.

Beth stated that in college she had a couple of boyfriends but she is not “proud of the choices I made back then. I was young and searching and ended up doing things I didn’t feel comfortable with... like being physically intimate and partying a lot...” She lived with a boyfriend for close to a year.

Beth has been married for about 12 years now. She met her husband at a Bible study group. She stated that her husband did not want any children but that she did, and so “he agreed to it.” Beth described the relationship as almost platonic and spoke
of wishing her husband was more affectionate and physically and emotionally intimate with her. She also wished that he had better parenting skills and “dealt with the children in ways that were less punishing and shaming.” Laughing, she remarked, “We’ll just have to keep working on it.”

Beth stated that her relationship with her family has not been very close since she left the Catholic Church. She said:

My mom didn’t accept my baptism . . . she doesn’t really want to talk about it . . . which is hard . . . and now we have different lifestyles . . . so, we do talk about the things we do have in common but there is not that kinship of the spirit.

She described very few relationships with family and friends, and her focus was mostly on her immediate family.

Beth seems to like to take some time to think before making a decision. She usually involves God in that process. She stated of a particular decision time:

I prayed first, asked God to help me . . . that’s the first thing . . . sometimes I write it out, get it on paper, and then a day or two later look at it again . . . it helps me to plan, to rehearse what I am going to do.

She added:

I guess I have to say there is two areas of my life . . . that God is encouraging me to move forward on . . . things I have struggled with for a long time . . . I am making a decision about it because God impressed me . . . so it helps for me to make a definite statement about it, to verbalize it to others.

She also seems to consider others as she makes decisions. She spoke of the decision to “convert” to a different religion: “It helped that my husband was agreeable . . . it also helped me to see another family living out the principles . . .”

Beth talked about the decision not to return to college when she was in the middle of her senior year. She said, “I thought I was taking just a leave of absence, but later, I decided not to return at all.” She explained:
The environment at school was not a good one, and I was struggling to know what was right... I felt that I would be better off not going back... I was doing my clinical training in the hospital and the whole environment seemed decadent to me... the students, the teachers... the teachers were teaching evolution and making fun of creation... and I felt there were times when the whole teaching was more like New Age or something strange... they were teaching us to do these things with our patients... I just didn’t think it was right.

When responding to the three stories presented in the interview, Beth seemed very empathic. She talked about incorporating other people into her decision-making process. She said, “I probably would seek some sort of counseling, from a pastor, or a friend... somebody who could help me know what to do... to gather support around me, to know where to go from here.” She also talked about drawing on God for support:

Even if you don’t have friends, God can use you. It helps me to know that I can sing for God, that I’m valuable to God, even though others may not see it. You find other things that affirm you.

Concerning the woman faced with the abortion issue, she responded:

That would be scary... I think I would be really on my knees... seeking God about what to do... but I really would not go for an abortion... but I think I would plan wisely, you know, in the event that I wasn’t there, to prepare ahead, maybe get someone to help with the children...

She added:

I guess I would arm myself with all the information from reading and consulting with doctors and other people... there might be some things I can do to help the situation, like eat a healthy diet, exercising, those kinds of things... but, God is ultimately in charge... I would leave it in His hands.

When talking about herself, Beth seemed to concentrate mostly on behavior, not feelings. She spoke about a time during adolescence when she was very depressed and did not want to live anymore:

I did have a brush with some depression when I was in my senior year, especially... that would be when my brother was going through his problems
... also, it was that my high school sweetheart had gone off to college ... [laughing] ... so he wasn’t there to support me.

She continued:

I remember I had gone to counselors in 7th grade because we had just moved to this new town and this new high school and I had a little bit of trouble adjusting, making new friends ... I remember going to see someone my parents knew from church and remember I went to that same counselor again in 10th grade ... I had gone from the junior high now into the senior high and again, I think I just wanted to fit in and make friends ... and it was about the same time when I reached out to that girl, too ... but then my senior year I don’t think I went to that counselor again ... I just remember talking a lot with my mom, talking about friendships and things ... I didn’t have my boyfriend to talk to, but I talked a lot with my mom ... my mom encouraged me ... she always said, “You know, you can feel sad about things, but never give up hope,” and I didn’t ... I trusted in God ... praying ... and my dad told me to read Job ... and the Psalms ... I was encouraged by the Psalms ...

Beth further explained:

I remember at that time I had a dream ... I was very, very ... feeling low ... and I remember even saying ... “Oh, Lord, just take my life away.” I would never have taken my own life, but “Lord just let me die or something” ... and that’s when I had a dream. I don’t remember exactly the details of it, but ... oh ... I was in a war of some kind ... a battle, and the enemy was fighting and shooting and shooting at me ... I remember feeling the bullets; I was getting shot; I remember it was really realistic and graphic ... I remember feeling the blood coming out of my mouth and nose and falling on the ground ... and ... dying ... and then I said, “No! ... I’m not gonna die ... I wanna live” ... and then the dream was over. I think that was the point when my will stepped in ... and I said, “No, I wanna live” ... there’s something worth living for ... God ... that’s something to live for ... and then spring weather came ... see ... I think a lot of my depression was related to my diet ... and then ... lack of sunshine, fresh air, and exercise ... because when spring time came ... sunshine, and going out ... it just naturally went away without really changing anything else and so with hindsight, because I don’t have depression like that anymore, since I changed my diet and lifestyle.

When asked about her feelings, she added:

You know, that was mostly it at that time. I couldn’t even tell somebody that there was a major bad thing happening in my life ... I was being successful in school ... so ... I could never put a pin point in it ... because I don’t really
think there was much of anything . . . it was, like I said, not getting enough exercise.

Beth said that her sister has also experienced depression.

Beth's drawings were marked by images of togetherness. She drew herself with her children and spoke of the day-to-day activities centered on them. Beth was not able to identify herself in her family drawing. She stated all the "children were so together, you couldn’t tell us apart.” Her family drawing also generated a conversation about how she had wanted to pursue music and theater but was encouraged instead to pursue her mother’s career in nursing. Her drawing of God was of God in the “heavenly city,” and she spoke of “God’s strong but kind hands.”

Carol

Carol is 42 years old, Caucasian, married and a mother of four. She is a homemaker but also homeschools her children and helps to manage a home-based metal business with her husband. After graduating from college with a nursing degree, she worked as a nurse for a short time until her first child was born. She has been a member of a Protestant church since she was a child and is involved with children’s programs at the church.

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Carol stated:

My mother and father were young when they married. I think my father was 19 and my mother 17. They had three children: my brother who is 4 years older, my sister who is 2 years older, and then myself. By the time I was 1, my parents had separated . . . and I would see my father sometimes at Grandma’s house . . . we didn’t have much contact with him, hardly any at all . . . he didn’t show much interest in us.
Carol stated that her father suffered a brain injury from an accident when her mother was pregnant with her and that her mother says he was never the same after that:

He started drinking and taking up with other women . . . there were times when the light would bother him and at times he went real quiet, like a depression . . . sometimes he would go away . . . my mother didn’t know where; she was very concerned . . . I think this is the reason why they separated . . . he ended up in the hospital and my mom would visit him there, but when he got out, he was still like this person she didn’t know . . . anyway, they divorced and my mother remarried when I was around 5 years old . . . I really don’t have a lot of memories of my dad . . . he wasn’t involved . . . so . . . we then moved out of state and my mother remarried and had two more children . . . and actually, she had a child before she was remarried and my biological father told her he was going to see to it that the children would be taken from her . . . this child is 4 years younger than me . . . and so . . . she knew a doctor she trusted and he referred her to this couple who she gave the baby for adoption . . . then she remarried. My mother said that situation was such that . . . it was kind of tough for her . . . she believed he would do that; she believed he had the power to do it . . . then, that marriage didn’t work out . . . I don’t remember a whole lot about that . . . this is going on my mom’s account . . . when we left she was expecting the last child and then her second husband left her at that time . . . and she was expecting . . . and she left with us to come here. I was around 8 years old.

Carol went on to say that her mother remarried a third time when Carol was 12 years old:

She married a man who had no children . . . he was nice, but drank sometimes . . . he was very kind to us . . . his farm was on lease and so when the lease was up, which was after a year, we moved to the farm and I was able to have a horse, which I always wanted . . . since I can remember I wanted one . . . and my stepfather would let me drive the tractor . . . he would let me do a lot of things . . . I really enjoyed that . . . anyway . . . I enjoyed that time very much . . . and then, it seems like, after awhile, his friends would come over and they would sit and drink and drink and then . . . it was like it was like he wasn’t happy anymore . . . he was irritable . . . I liked him very much . . . he was respectful to us when he wasn’t drinking . . . when he was drinking . . . he . . . ah . . . things were different . . . he would become irritable when drinking and we would just slip through . . . that was hard on a teenager . . . when there is somebody that you like and you know they like you and you work together well, that sort of thing, then the drinking changes everything . . . it’s like who are you now?
Carol stated the drinking increasingly got worse and that she was glad when she left home to attend a boarding school at the age of 16. Although she missed home and was very homesick, she did not have to deal with that situation on the daily basis. Her mother eventually separated and they continue to be separated at the present time.

Carol went on to describe how she not only lost the relationship with her stepfather due to the drinking but also the one with her mother who became preoccupied with the drinking and was not as emotionally available.

Carol spoke fondly of her paternal grandmother, who maintained contact with her through letters and occasional visits. She seemed to have a special bond with this grandmother through her growing up years.

**Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences**

Carol’s early images of God were of “awe.” She stated:

I just knew there was something special... tall... big... I felt a peace many times in times of turmoil... or difficulties... I remember my mother would have tough times, but she always seemed to believe... God was big... it was comforting to me to know He was in control of everything... He is really in charge... He has a plan... from the beginning until the end.

Carol stated, “We did not attend church on a regular basis when I was growing up.” She added:

My mom was working hard, having a hard time... sometimes she was doing things that were not good, like smoking... I was 10 years old when I was baptized... I remember we were living on the farm... the pastor came faithfully... my mother said he was so kind... I remember studying the Bible with my sister... and I remember my grandma came for my baptism... and there was some other young people... and I remember feeling very happy inside.

Carol does not have many memories of being a part of a community of believers, but remembered that occasionally a church family would take her and her siblings to
church. She later attended a Christian boarding school and states she enjoyed the worship in the dorm and the religious talks the dorm dean presented to the girls. There were no regular religious practices at home.

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Carol spoke of a God who is loving, big, and awesome:

God has a plan . . . He’s there . . . always there . . . He cares about all the people, my children, my husband . . . and my concerns . . . He knows all . . . He knows me . . . sometimes I put myself out of His listening range . . . somewhat . . . because I allow myself to be so busy . . . distracted . . . then I feel not so close . . . like right now . . . I notice that . . . I don’t feel as close . . .

She talked about wishing that God would tell her just what to do because sometimes it is hard to know what is best. She added, “I wish God would do e-mail.” She talked also of expecting God to help her husband be more present in the home and to be more involved in parenting their children:

Right now, I’m expecting God to help me raise the children the best way and I’m wanting Him to work the situation out . . . so that my husband will spend more time with the children . . . I would like to see him more connected . . . I expect God to bring peace within . . .

When talking about times when God did not seem to provide her with a clear answer, Carol said, “I felt alone . . . I was very afraid . . . I felt God had forsaken me . . .” Carol added she feels God communicates to her best through nature when she takes walks and is quiet and still. She said, “I feel His presence if I just take the time . . . to be quiet . . . to be still . . . sometimes I get very busy . . . then I can’t feel Him very well . . .”

When Carol talked about her relationship with God, she said:

I don’t think He dislikes me . . . I think He wants me . . . I know that He wants me to be in His kingdom . . . And He wants my children in His
kingdom...I think He knows I’m struggling...and He really wants me to give Him everything...He sees me as a person who is following Him...and...but struggling...

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Carol has a difficult time describing herself. After a time, she stated she was a homeschooling mom and that “my husband and I own our own business.” When asked to describe personal characteristics, she talked about her love of horses and gardening and added:

I enjoy people, I am honest, faithful, and sometimes distracted...if there are many things going on...I can do a good job if I don’t have too many other things going on...and I’m always thinking of my children...

Carol talked about enjoying sports when she was in the boarding school. She talked about not having many friends, because “the kids they acted like friends, but then they would make jokes...I don’t think they realized it...how mean it was...” She continued, “But I got involved, especially in sports, and that helped me.” About her drawing of herself, Carol stated:

I have a pleasant expression on my face...and I have a big smile...I am sort of asking, who am I? This is a person, who though had a difficult childhood, has come through and is strong...and I realize at the same time that...there are weaknesses that come along with that...I think that I will overcome them...and I will continue to grow...

Carol was not sure what she wants to do when her children are grown and out of the home.

Carol has been married for 17 years. She met her husband when she was in college. Shortly after they met, she broke up with a college student she was dating and started dating her husband and they were married after 1 year. She talked about that time as a “time of searching for me...I didn’t trust myself to know what to do...” She talked about feeling that God led her to break up with her boyfriend and
start the relationship with her husband. She stated her ex-boyfriend was very intelligence and musically talented and that she felt “she was not a match for him.” She seemed to feel inadequate when comparing herself to him. On the other hand, her present husband seemed stable and able to “take care of her” and to “provide for her needs,” while at the same time he seemed to “need her.” She described the relationship with her husband as “nice . . . he is respectful of me . . . most of the time . . . sometimes there are these habit things that I see that his dad does to his mom . . . these little habit things, but I will tell him . . . I’ll bring it up . . .” She talked about wishing he would be more present and involved with her and the children but she adds, “I see he is trying . . . I think we have a pretty good relationship . . . but I wish to see it improved . . .”

Carol focused heavily on her children. Most of her day-to-day activities revolved around the children and her thoughts for the future remain centered on providing for them.

Carol seemed very ambivalent when faced with decisions. She seemed to look for someone, something, to clearly indicate to her which path to take. She spoke of taking time to think from different angles and to consider the consequences of each choice. When talking about a difficult decision she made, she stated:

A very difficult decision was the situation in college with my boyfriend . . . having to break up the relationship . . . it was heart-breaking . . . I was praying a lot . . . really, diligently praying about it . . . I felt God told me to let go of him . . . I’m surprised we didn’t get married . . . I remember being in church . . . after we broke up and he was up front playing and the tears were just streaming on my face . . . I had to make a decision . . . I had to find a place to move to . . . and Tom [present husband] was saying there were possibilities where he lived . . . I could have a job . . . take care of my sister’s schooling . . . so I had to make some decisions . . . that was a very hard decision . . . I remember just praying . . . turning to God . . . just talking to him . . . asking for direction . . .
Carol does not seem to realize directly, but for the most part her decisions seem to be related to dependency needs and a certain uncertainty about her own self. She added to the decision-making situation above:

He married a girl who I think is more suited for him . . . she is very musical . . . I thought of myself . . . I'm a nurse . . . he is extremely musical . . . he is very entrenched in music . . . and I thought, how can I be to him what these other talented young women can be? And they can work together . . . you know . . . doing music together . . . well . . . he married someone who is very musical . . . and they do music together . . . [pause] this really stirs up a lot of emotions in me [teary] . . . [pause] . . . I think things turned out just fine . . . I think that Tom needs me [laughing nervously] . . .

When presented with the three stories, Carol seemed to consider different options fully and to feel comfortable stating her thoughts and ideas. Nevertheless, she did not seem to know how capable she was of analyzing and thinking through situations and did not seem to trust herself in that process.

Although Carol shared her feelings somewhat, she usually seemed quick to dismiss or transform them. Many of her feelings were connected to her children and insecurities and fears about “doing the right things for them and their future.” Feeling secure and safe seemed to be major motivations for her, and anything that threatened that was dismissed or transformed. She was more comfortable focusing on behavior and things over which she had more control. She seemed ambivalent about wanting to be taken care of and wanting to experiment with taking care of herself.

Carol’s drawings were marked by talks about “overcoming a difficult past” and “God being in control.” Her self-drawing showed a “big smile” and she talked about having “many things to overcome.” Her family drawing generated talks about her stepfather, her bond with him, and the sadness of feeling abandoned by him. Her drawing of God showed “God happy, helping someone.” She talked about warmth, brightness, and glory.
Debbie

Debbie is 27 years old, Caucasian, and single. She is a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. She is a member of a Lutheran church and is very involved in church activities. She attended a Baptist and a Methodist church for a time but has attended Lutheran churches regularly since college.

**Theme One: Early Relational Experiences**

Debbie grew up with her mother and father and a brother who was 1½ years older until she was 12. Her mother became ill and was diagnosed with schizophrenia when Debbie was around 9 years old. When she was 12, her parents separated and were divorced when she was 13. She added, “We stayed in the same town, but we moved to a different house . . . and my mother stayed in our house and we moved with my father, and from that time I just lived with him . . .” Her father remarried when she was 14 years old. She considered her stepmother her “real mother” and no longer maintains contact with her biological mother. She stated her mother continues to be very ill but refuses treatment. She felt that for her own sake she could not remain in relationship with her mother.

Debbie described her mother as a “stay-at-home mom . . . she did a lot of arts and crafts and took care of us . . .” She stated she felt the closest to her mother until her mother became ill. Concerning her mother after she became ill, she added:

If my mother was more depressed, she was more withdrawn . . . so it was more like she was sleeping a lot . . . and when she got paranoid . . . then she had a lot of confusion . . . ah . . . a lot of delusions and people plotting against her . . . that she would tell me about . . . and it was very apparent that things were wrong . . . she . . . ah . . . in some ways I would say she was neglectful . . . and right toward the end . . . things got worse . . . I mean she was abusive in some ways . . . she didn’t want us to go to school . . . and things like that . . .
She described her father as

mild mannered . . . hard working . . . generous . . . he never hesitates to help other people and he gives a lot of himself to other people . . . he is affectionate but in a more subtle way . . . he doesn't really hug you and say "I love you" and things like that, but he always will make a point to spend time with you to show he cares . . . I would describe him as a spiritual person . . . he is a sensitive person . . . he likes poetry . . . he is also a very dedicated person . . .

She described her stepmother as

very centered, very growth oriented . . . very giving . . . highly creative . . . she's the kind of person that tries to make meaning out of whatever she's doing . . . she's someone that is very honest, very straightforward . . .

At another point she talked about how much her stepmother has meant to her and how much she has learned about herself and about life from her. Her stepmother is studying to become a priest.

Debbie had fond memories of her childhood . . . "planting things in the garden, playing with the neighborhood kids in the yard . . . my dad played the guitar, and he would play the guitar and we would sit around and listen to his songs . . ." She described positive relationships at home, school, and church. Of school experiences she said:

I always had very close friends, and then a larger circle of friends so there was a lot of people to stay connected to . . . I always had people I felt very close to . . . and once we moved when I was 9 years old . . . I made friends very quickly and I still had that core group of friends which I still have today . . . very long-lasting . . . and especially after we moved I had a network of friends and family that I grew up with, even though we were not family . . . we always called each others' parents mom and dad . . . it was multiple families . . . and pretty connected . . . like having sisters or cousins . . . and grandparents.

About her parents' divorce, Debbie said:

The communication was pretty open . . . I knew pretty much what was going on . . . I talked a lot to my dad and my biological mother's parents were very involved and I talked to them quite a bit . . . I think it was a difficult time . . .
but more so because of my mother’s illness... and how that affected her... than the actual divorce... the divorce... it made sense to me... very much...

Debbie described a very warm and caring network of family, friends, and church community. She said of family, “I really had a chance to get to know them and they were pretty influential in my family... grandparents, uncles, aunts... my parents stay very connected to their families...” Of friends and church community she added, “We always played with the kids from church and the neighborhood... our families were all friends and everyone was everyone’s mom and dad... we are still all friends...” She continued:

My [step]mother... I consider her a model of how to be as a person... and just what she’s given me [tears]... also my church family, the church families when I went to high school, they are very much like home to me... the groups I had there... also the church that I went to when I moved to graduate school... they became another home to me...

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

Debbie stated she has memories of sitting in church, singing and making arts and crafts in Sunday school... but they aren’t really what made me connected to a higher being and a relationship with Him... I remember people talking about a loving God, but not really understanding and knowing it myself...

She added:

I think the earliest memory of God I have is like a flannel picture, like the ones you stick on the board... Caucasian, blue eyes, the glowing, the white flowing robe wherever He went... and it didn’t seem real... it looked like a real person, but not really... I also remember another one... I remember watching those T.V. specials about Jesus, dying and being crucified... I remember every time I watched them I would cry through the entire thing... at that time, it was like a real person... it was more real to me at that point... and the reality of what happened and how this person suffered and how this was God who had come to earth... then I would picture it as Jesus in
Debbie stated:

I don’t remember how old I was, maybe around 10 years old . . . I remember lying in bed . . . it was night time and I don’t remember much of what I was thinking . . . but I remember thinking that there might not be a God . . . and I thought about it . . . and decided I believed that there was a God . . . and I felt a connection with Him . . . and I can remember sometime after that . . . I was aware of praying and talking to God and feeling very connected . . . it wasn’t that I didn’t feel that before, it was that there was for the first time, a relationship.

Debbie’s family attended church regularly and was always very involved in church activities. As Debbie became older, she became very involved also in youth groups and ended up joining a mission trip overseas the summer before she entered college. She spoke of that experience as providing a “turning point” for her and helping to strengthen her commitment to church, God, and service to others. She talked about being a helper in Sunday school and “always being involved with people and their families.”

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Debbie described God as

very loving . . . someone who is always with me . . . always present . . . always inside of me . . . He is always inside of me and going through everything with me but at the same time . . . around me so I feel sheltered . . . if there was a time where I was pausing or praying or talking to God, it was very much a time for me where I could just leave everything behind and just rest and be completely and totally loved and accepted and . . . whole . . . as if everything that was difficult or wrong . . . went away . . . so God is very present . . . very loving . . .

Debbie talks about how “the difficulties in my family . . . I think during that time . . . God became very central to my life . . .” She added, “I think that a lot of images of how I saw God then, have remained with me . . .”
Debbie talked about experiencing God in a sensory way. She said:

I don’t picture the way that He looks, like a person, I picture things like . . . I had a picture that someone drew . . . it has Jesus holding a lamb in His arms . . . and I think of that . . . I don’t really think of His face . . . I think of more just like . . . the arms around me . . . like a presence I feel . . . God inside me and also walking right beside me . . . with me . . . it’s like God is there with me and a part of me so what I am going through He is going through with me . . .

Debbie talked about God “being the One who created that which I am . . . and being the One who is with me, supporting and understanding of who I am . . .” She talked about peace and trust as outcomes of her relationship with God and a sense of being connected to many people who are instruments in her journey to God and to the a better understanding of herself.

When asked about a time she felt distant from God, she replied:

The only time I can think of . . . is in relationship to my mother . . . and deciding not be in relationship with her . . . I wasn’t sure that it was the right thing to do . . . and I decided to do it . . . I thought about it, and I prayed a lot about it . . . so . . . I didn’t necessarily feel distant from God . . . but then I thought if God didn’t want me to do this . . . in this relationship with her . . . would I be able to not do it? But I decided to go ahead and do it anyway . . . so I think at that time I was uncertain . . . if I had made the wrong choice and I think at that time I felt it was absolutely the thing I had to do at that point . . . and I was afraid that maybe God wouldn’t understand or would think that I had the sense in some way to make a different decision . . . and that was not something I would be willing to do . . . so, I think I was distant but I think it was more that I distanced myself for a little bit . . . once I took some time . . . it felt like I never had been distant the whole time . . .

In a way, Debbie suspended her relationship with God for a time in order to fulfill what she felt she needed to and then returned to it without risking losing the connection altogether.

Debbie felt that God wanted her to “be who I am . . . and be in a relationship with Him . . . His love is unconditional . . .” She described God in terms involving “fullness, love, and joy.”
Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Others

Debbie described herself as in transition at the present time:

In a way I’m out of touch with a lot of the parts of my life that are very important but are temporarily ... everything is kind of on hold ... out of balance ... out of touch ... with friends, family, and church ... [she was away doing a practicum as part of her graduate studies] ...

She went on to describe herself as made up of many different parts and “having her center or core” nurtured by the many different people in her life.” She added:

At this very core, I am very peaceful ... I am just aware of being a child of God ... that’s who I am on this deep level and it’s like God is with me ... and I am completely whole ... completely loved ... completely understood ...

She went on to describe herself as “kind, caring, religious person ... a good dancer ...”

Debbie discussed deep relationships with friends, family, professors and mentors, and ministers, including their influence in helping her discover herself and become who she is. She talked about maintaining close and long-term relationships and how relationships are central to her life and helping her “understand who I am and what is important to me ... and what my values are ...” In a way, she described herself as truly a self in relation.

Debbie has a boyfriend and they have had a relationship for 2 years. She described the relationship as

mutually fulfilling, very honest ... very loving and very comfortable ... we have a lot of fun ... we have a lot in common ... we enjoy a lot of things and have similar values of how we want to live and how we want life to be ... it’s important to us both to communicate with each other and work things out and we are honest and have a relationship based on something real not some ... illusion of how we are ... we love each other ...
Debbie seemed very centered as she considered choices and different dilemmas. She often consults with others, prays, and takes time to consider the options fully. When facing difficult tasks, Debbie relies on her previous experiences, the advice and modeling of others, her trust in herself to make healthy decisions, and her trust in God to be loving and present with her regardless of the circumstances. She seems to incorporate her feelings as she considers the different choices and seems to allow herself to be instructed by her feelings as well in her decision-making process.

When Debbie talked about the decision to end the relationship with her mother, she stated:

What helped me is that I spend a lot of time thinking and praying about it, and I knew that I had tried a lot of different options and that isn't a rushed decision whatsoever . . . that I had fully thought through . . . all the implications that I could . . . it helped me to have my stepmother who I think is a good model of someone who is very giving and yet has very healthy limits in relationships with others . . . it also helped to believe in me and the strength that I had . . . and all the people I had that cared about me . . .

When responding to the three stories presented in the interview, Debbie was very empathic. She talked about consulting other people, praying, and getting professional help. She seemed able to integrate feelings and thoughts as she considered the different situations.

Debbie talked about a sense of inner freedom, of richness, of fulfillment. Several times during the interview she allowed herself to be moved by the conversation and shed tears of joy and also of sadness about different life events and circumstances. She laughed readily also and displayed much assurance as she talked about her present life and her goals for the future. When she talked about the future, she said, "I imagine myself in the middle of a community of people, friends and family"
and church that I’ll be involved in and part of . . . I imagine myself changing and
growing in different ways . . .”

Despite the fact that Debbie talked about being in transition right now, she
seemed to trust that this temporary state would pass and that she would find herself in
a more focused, centered, and connected space soon.

Debbie’s drawings were marked by talks of deep connection with God and
others. When drawing herself, Debbie drew lines connecting her to the many people
in her life and their contribution to who she is. When drawing her family, she drew
two families, one before her mother’s illness and one after. She spoke of positive
relationships in both. When Debbie drew God, she drew God inside herself as well as
“God’s arms around the whole universe.”

Esther

Esther is 29 years old, Caucasian, married with no children. She works full-
time as an accountant. She has a high school diploma and has done some college
courses toward an A.S. degree in Accounting. Esther was baptized Catholic and,
although she has not attended regularly, she considers herself a Catholic.

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Esther stated she grew up with her father, mother, and a younger sister until
the age of 9 when her father left. Her parents were divorced a year later. She added
that she had an older brother who was given up for adoption. Her mother was 18 and
single when she had him and about 8 years ago they reconnected. Her mother
remarried when she was 12 years old. She stated she had only sporadic contact with
her father after he left.
Esther described her growing up years as horrible... I don’t remember much about my dad... and my stepfather was an alcoholic... A typical alcoholic... he didn’t work... and my mother worked to support us all... his two kids included... and we could do nothing right... and there was a constant battle between my stepfather and myself... always I was the mouthy one and, you know... sticking up for my mother and... they would constantly... we would wake up every single morning to them fighting about something... he was in treatment at least a minimum of five or six times... he was also physically and verbally abusive... he would slap, spank, use the belt, call us names, ridicule us in front of other people... that’s the way he punished us kids... he had no controls... it was not good... [tears, but she quickly changes the subject]...

Esther added that she got into more fights with her stepfather because she felt compelled to protect her younger sister and her mother. Esther went on to say that she “got out of the house as soon as I could when I graduated from high school at 18.”

When asked about her father, Esther stated:

I don’t remember much from when my dad lived with us... I blocked it out or something... my sister remembers more than I do... and I prefer... if I’m blocking it out... then I don’t want to know... I don’t want to know... I tell her I don’t want to know...

She maintained distant but sporadic contact with her father.

Esther described her mother as a “hard worker... she deserves better than what she has gotten in life.” She stated her mother first became pregnant at the age of 15 and her parents “forced her give the baby up for adoption.” She then met and married her father a couple of years later. Esther described her as passive and unable to protect herself and the children. She added that her mother was religious but did not attend church much “because of the shame and guilt of having a child out of wedlock and of the divorce.”

Esther had no memories of other people that were part of her growing up years. No grandparents, aunts, uncles, or friends. She stated she had some friends in
school but “never felt very close to anyone.” She added she felt the closest to her sister because “I was the one that had to protect her.” Regarding school, she added, “I showed up to class, I did my homework, I was never disruptive . . . I was kind of quiet, I guess . . . Just kind of sat there and listened . . . did my stuff . . . I was no trouble . . .”

**Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences**

Esther stated:

The only thing that I can really think of is . . . just talking about it . . . or listening to it at church and at catechism . . . I don’t really recall an image . . . like a physical image . . . probably looked something like Jesus . . . a man . . . with long hair . . . and a robe . . .

She added, “I remember feeling that God can see everything . . . that He is just there . . .”

Esther remembered going to church sometimes but did not have any memories that were welcoming:

I remember sitting in church and counting five things that had to happen before church was over . . . and I remember in church . . . just okay . . . sitting there . . . okay, that’s one . . . we shook hands, that’s two [laughter] . . . I guess I was a little bored . . . and I remember having classes . . . some kind of classes there . . . I don’t remember much about it though . . . I also remember my mom not going up for communion . . . she would tell my sister and I we could go . . . she couldn’t go because she wasn’t married in the church . . . all the remarriages . . . and she is divorced and stuff like that . . . and maybe that’s why she never really pressed the issue of going . . . she was like an outcast by the Catholic standards.

**Theme Three: Present God Representation**

Esther spoke about a God who is
everywhere . . . He can do what He wants to do . . . I think He lets things, bad things happen because they still need to happen . . . and that just the way it is . . . I think He can do whatever He wants to do . . . He lets cancer or stuff like that happen with children . . . dying . . . I just think that’s just the way it’s got to be . . . and it can’t be good all the time . . . unfortunately, that’s how things are . . . people have to die . . . well . . .

Esther did not speak about a personal God with whom she had a relationship. She said:

I think He’s there . . . I don’t think I have a relationship with Him . . . although I think He has a relationship with everybody . . . I guess He’s there . . . I think He is there when I need Him to be there . . . that’s about it, I guess . . . [pause] . . . you are making me think . . .

Esther described God as “loving . . . there.” She had difficulties imagining God and when she was asked to think about it, she stated, “He’s invisible . . . just a little light.”

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Esther seemed to have difficulties describing and talking about herself. She stated:

I don’t really see myself without Tom [husband] and Tim [stepson] . . . he’s 7 . . . he comes to visit . . . he’s definitely part of my life . . . he’s not a constant reminder because he’s not there all the time . . . but he’s there . . . I love him . . . he’s a good kid . . .

When asked again, she stated, “I would say I’m affectionate, friendly, funny at times . . . and a bit controlling . . . a control freak . . .” Esther goes on to give examples of how she attempts to know about their finances and it seemed as though she has been told she is “controlling” when she begins to ask questions. She added, “I’m pretty passive, I guess . . . I don’t really confront . . . this is probably why I don’t feel like I have any huge obstacles . . . I don’t like to confront . . .”

Of her relationship with her husband, Esther stated:
We lived together for a year and a half and then he had an affair and had a child... we then separated and he married the mother of his child... we were apart for 3 years... and then things weren't going well with his wife... and he wanted to talk... he said he wanted a divorce from his wife and get back together with me... and we've been together since... we decided probably 6 months after we were back together that we wanted to get married... so 2½ years later we were married... and we have been married for a year and a half...

Esther went on to explain that

when we had dated for a year and a half 10 years ago, we had an okay relationship but I was very controlling and demanding... and in those 3 years that we were apart, I think, I definitely grew up a lot... and now it's totally different than it was before... I think we have a really good relationship... I'm very happy with it... the only thing I can think of that is not so comfortable is... ah... he has this obsession with pornography... but it's not something I worry about much... I've learned to live with it... he spends a lot of time looking at pornography in the net... I guess, it doesn't affect me... we get along great...

Esther stated she maintained a relationship with her mother and stepfather and that she visited them occasionally. Her relationships with others were mostly work-related and kept at a distance. Her focus was on the relationship with her husband and the possibility of having a child someday (she has not been successful in becoming pregnant).

Esther seemed to approach decision making in a way that does not take into consideration much of her emotions. Of the decision to re-enter the relationship with her husband, she said, "I don't know if that was difficult... maybe it was... because there was some emotional stuff going on, but I really didn't hold it against him for very long at all." Of her feelings regarding the circumstances, she said, "It just kind of went... I love him and, you know... if it happens I'll deal with it..."

When responding to the three stories, Esther seemed to again approach situations without much empathy or emotions. She responded:
I think she should not worry so much why it happened . . . there's not much she can do about it right now . . . it's happened . . . it's done . . . I would just focus on what I needed to do now, get a job . . . let him go, get the divorce quick and done with as soon as possible . . .

In response to another story, she stated, "I would just do it . . . even if it meant I had to die . . . the children still would have a father and I think that a man can do just fine raising children alone . . ."

Esther did not speak of involving others, God, or any other process when making decisions. She seemed to have difficulties connecting with emotions in the process of decision making.

Esther did not talk much about her feelings, and when she did, she seemed to quickly dismiss them. Several times during the interview she stated, "I'd rather not think about it" or "I just don't like to go there." Her emotions seem mostly cut off from her and she spoke of "just riding them out," meaning "let it go, see what happens, just deal with it." Several times during the interview, she became teary but quickly changed the subject or dismissed the significance of her feelings. At times, she laughed as a way of denying her feelings. She did not speak of much warmth either internally or externally.

Esther's only spoken passion was that of having children. She has been undergoing infertility treatment for about a year and hopes to be able to conceive soon. Overall, she seemed to have very low expectations of her life in general, almost as if she is warding off being disappointed. She said, "I sort of just ride the moment . . . and I'm a boring person."

Esther's drawings were marked by her difficulties defining self and God. She drew herself with husband and son and was not able to describe herself in any way. She focused on describing them instead. Her drawing of her family was of an
extremely happy family. She talked about wanting “to see it that way.” Esther was unable to make a picture of God. She stated, “He’s invisible; I can’t draw Him.”

Frances

Frances is 51 years old, Caucasian, and single. She has a Ph.D. and is a college professor. She is Jewish and has attended her present synagogue for 11 years. Prior to that she was away from formal attendance at a synagogue and from involvement in religious Judaism. She states that from the ages of 13 to 40 she did not participate in any organized Jewish life; she just began returning to Judaism about 11 years ago. She speaks of being involved with Jewish youth groups that focused on social and various religious issues but that “organized religion seemed to shut out women so I had it with organized religion.”

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Frances grew up with her parents and a younger brother. Her parents experienced a miscarriage before she was born and were very “excited” about her arrival. She spoke fondly of memories related to home, family, and extended family:

My father had 10 children in his family . . . my mother had 5 . . . so I had a very large extended family, and my father’s family would get together a few times a year . . . big raucous events . . . with his sisters telling jokes . . . and ah . . . stories . . . and lots of food and lots of laughter.

Unfortunately, her father died of a massive heart attack when she was 17. She spoke of her father’s death as “very, very painful for me . . . he was really the primary emotional nurturer in our family . . . [tears] . . . and that was hard.” She continued:

I was a senior in high school and it was devastating emotionally for me . . . and it also meant that I couldn’t go away to college . . . and I was very angry about that . . . ah . . . it meant I stayed home and I got a full time job and I went to college at night . . . and I was very, very, angry at him as well as the
circumstances . . . I felt a huge loss . . . I remember going fishing with my father and . . . ah . . . my brother and I . . . we would go deep sea fishing and . . . I was really proud because I was a girl and I had the same fishing rod my brother had and had the same experience and I thought that was really special . . . I remember going to work with my dad . . . he worked in the edge of Chinatown in New York City . . . I remember feeling so proud to go to work on the subway and then have lunch in these basement Chinese restaurants . . . it was just a very exotic experience . . . very . . . very wonderful experience for me.

Frances spoke of her mother as more reserved and not as emotionally available, but present. Her mother grew up in a foster home; when Frances’s mother was just days old, her own mother fell from a window and died. Frances spoke of her mother’s difficult growing-up years in foster homes and later with her father and a stepmother, who was abusive to her.

Frances spoke of her years in elementary school as very positive. She stated, “I was a star . . . a very good student . . . I had good friends and felt very positive about myself.” She added with sadness:

When I made the transition to junior high school, I didn’t do well academically and I was taken out of the accelerated classes and put in the noncollege track . . . and that was very hard for me because my friends were in those other classes . . . and it was more about other issues than about my academics . . . but my academics were affected and nobody in those days bothered to ask why this was happening . . . that this was not about my not being smart enough . . . these are painful memories . . .

Frances went on to talk about how emotionally she was torn about gender and sexual identity issues, but that there was no forum to talk about it and no way to resolve it on her own. It was not until much later that Frances came to know and accept herself as lesbian and to reconstruct her identity.

Concerning relationships, she said:

I always had friends and I always had real good close friends . . . and that has continued to this day . . . I think that that’s been such a powerful part of my life . . . long, old friends . . . deep friends . . . I think that my father modeled
that, my mother also... they had friends from high school who still get
together once a month... this is 60 years now... since they were in high
school... I also had close relationships with teachers in elementary school.

When speaking about the synagogue she attended when young, she said:

I had virtually no relationship with the rabbi... I would be surprised if he
even knew my name... and our teachers were these religious guys who came
out from Brooklyn to teach who were real old time... I couldn’t identify.

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

Frances’s earliest memories of religion are related to

being in a Saturday service... there are mostly men there... they are
wearing prayer shawls and ah... I couldn’t understand a word of Hebrew, I
didn’t know what was going on... but... there’s a song that’s traditionally
sung at the end of the service in Hebrew that, I just remember... I remember
the melody... a couple of them... and it was the melodies of the song and
just being in that setting... it’s just me at the service, which was typical...
I’m surrounded by this feeling... a good feeling... a deep feeling... it’s
moving, it’s emotionally moving...

Frances spoke of her early religious experiences in the following way:

My parents’ involvement in the synagogue was more in terms of... they
were founding members, but it was more social involvement and fund-raising
involvement... to get this thing going, and keep it going... my father was a
volunteer in the youth group, my mother was in the sisterhood... and they
had rummage sales... things like that... they sent both my brother and I to
what was called “Hebrew school” at that time... which meant after school a
couple of times a week... and then we would go to services on Saturday...
I don’t know if there was a Sunday part to that... my brother hated going
and I loved going... he had to go because he was a boy... I did not have to
go because I was a girl... because in those days it was very important for
sons to be Bar mitzvah... to reach 13 years old and go through the initiation
rites, but in those days many girls didn’t go to religious school at all... and in
fact... in those days, Orthodox Jewish girls were not allowed to be Bat
mitzvah... our synagogue did, but it was a very modified version... it was
not the whole ritual that boys went through... it was more like a party than
something that had the deep spiritual meaning... unfortunately, it was the
girls who were more motivated to do this than the boys, and the boys had to
do it and the girls didn’t when I was growing up... so, I did have what is
called the Bat mitzvah, although it was three girls, it was only on Friday night... sort of Bat mitzvah for light version... it was very unsatisfying for me... because I knew I was the best Hebrew reader in the school and I wanted to do the whole... I wanted to read the Torah... the Torah was the most sacred book in Judaism... and we weren't allowed to do that... and I was very angry about it... that's when I began to leave the synagogue... I felt really betrayed and it was sort of the roots of my feminism, which I didn't recognize at that time... I was angry... and I left the synagogue... and my parents were not active religiously and so they didn't... I don't think that I even talked to them about it... that wasn't much support for a greater religiosity in the house... and so I stopped going to services... I stopped going to the temple...

Frances talked about becoming involved in ethnic Judaism and social justice causes through her youth group. She said, "My passion increased and the cultural connection, but the religious connection to Judaism stopped at that point."

Frances’s early image of God was of "the big man in the sky, who rewards you if you do well and punishes you if you don't." She added, "I struggled with the concept of God, especially after my father died... I didn’t feel I could relate to God if affected the way I related to Him."

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Frances spoke of God as

energy... a force... so, that God is in the wind... the word in Hebrew for wind is the same as one of the words for soul or spirit... and I think of God in the breeze... God is in the trees... God is in people.

Frances went on to discuss a recent diagnosis of cancer and her struggles with God right now:

Because I'm in such a struggle with God right now, I have thought and do hold on to that thought of God as an universal force, as kind of the life force... in the world, the universe... but because I'm so angry with God right now and I'm still working that through, it's not as smooth as it would have been a year ago... so... things are out of sync right now with God... but I do still hold on to that sort of universal force, and when I think of the horrible
catastrophes that have happened, like the Holocaust or like the famines or like AIDS, I don't think of that as God's work. I think of that as things that people have done to people, or people have created an environment that's toxic, that's doing this to people... or people are greedy and there's not enough food... because there really is enough food but some people hoard it... and have more than they need and some people have none...

Frances talked about God at the time of her father's death:

It was the first time that I felt distant from God... I was so angry with God... and I didn't believe there was a God, that if there was a God, God would never have let this happen... and I really... broke away from God... I ended that relationship because I felt that God had abandoned me... so, I abandoned God and it was over... it was such a loss and I was so young... I didn't have a way to understand that spiritually, and even though I have been angry with God recently, I have a way to understand that and I have a connection and a support system to understand that.

Frances added:

I feel like recently... since my surgery and cancer diagnosis, I have really stepped away from God... and there are moments where I feel like God stepped away from me... and you know, I try to not believe that... but, this year I do... [crying]... I think prior to this fall, I was really believing that God is always there and it's you who goes away... this year... I question that... and I'm real unresolved... on one hand, I feel some shame about that [tears]... and on the other hand, I know that that's the struggle that people go through... so, I'm doing a lot of questioning... and... I feel closer to God than I did in September... then, I felt abandoned... I thought... I still feel that at times... you know... I couldn't pray for months... hundreds of people praying for me... I couldn't pray... and I still struggle.

Frances continued to talk as she described her attempts to reconcile bad with good. She said:

There are other times when I haven't understood and in retrospect I understand more... and yet, this is a time when my life has been so much of what I wanted it to be... I have the most incredible relationship I could ever want... a job that I love... friends, and I had health... and now, I don't know if I'm gonna be alive... 3 years from now, 2 years from now... I think... God, if that really is my path, I don't know how to reconcile that... with God... so that's the piece that I struggle on... that's kind of where I am now with God and it changes from moment to moment... talk about fluid... it's, you know, it's always in flux... I was too sick for months to even
struggle... I was just too sick... and now I'm getting energy back, so I have the energy to struggle... and I recognize that and that's good... and it's also exhausting.

She further explained:

Because I think of God as a relationship, I have all the feelings that one would have in relation, which really is every feeling imaginable... I think of God as the flowers that bloom, so when I see that, I just feel this deep appreciation, this love of the flower and God who created the flower, so I feel very loving toward God... I feel this transcendence... and it's almost transformational for me... When I was a little girl, I felt scared... scared in the sense that God is a punishing God... I don't believe that now... but I feel scared in the sense that God's plan is so much bigger than I can ever comprehend... scared is not quite the right word... I'll try to explain it in the opposite... I think that may be easier... in the moments that I trust that there is a divine plan and that I don't know about, I feel peaceful... and that my relationship with God is a peaceful one... in the moments where I don't trust that there is a bigger plan that I don't understand... then I feel scared... and then I don't understand what my life is about and what the meaning is and what, you know, especially what things like the dark night of the soul are about... you know, it's easy to understand what the joy is about, that's no brainer... but the struggles, the pain, the anguish, not just mine but suffering in the world... in those moments, I feel despairing, I feel angry with God... it's another set of feelings I have with God... and I don't trust... it's the trust piece that's pivotal in the feelings...

Frances continued talking about trust and God as she learned from the past:

Setting the diagnosis of cancer aside because I don't have as good a handle on it because it's so recent, I think that all the events and turning points in my life, whether positive or negative in terms of affect or impact at the time, they all seem like... they put me on a track that I needed to be on... that most of them, many of them were not things I would have chosen, if given alternatives... some of them were external to me, some of them I did choose, like moving here... but each of them, you know, as the phrase of the day goes, opened up a window and put me on a different path... that I think ultimately was a real good path... but at the time didn't seem to be a path at all... seemed to be a dead end... I would like to take comfort from that.

Frances went on to say that she feels closest to God when she is engaged in service to others and when she is in nature. She added:
I love the mystery, that God is unknowable... that there is always more to understand... and that I'll never, never, fully comprehend, because God is incomprehensible totally... I love that... I love that as a Jew... trying to keep on working at that... and seeing God even in the dark times as well as in the wonderful times and trust... it's the most difficult relationship I think I'll ever have... but also... it can be the most rewarding relationship... because it is transcendent...

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Frances described herself as a

person that likes to participate in my environment and I pay attention and get excited about culture, both culture role events but also culture in a more general sense... I'm an internal processor, but I have good enough social skills, and after I process internally, I do like to talk about my process...

She continued:

I have friends who call me "the connection," because I like to know what's going on around me... I also have a tendency to multitask and to do too much... and be too organized and rigid, and I work at slowing down and being more mindful about what I do and when I do it... I think of myself as deeply passionate about the things that I care about and deeply connected to my friends... I think I am a good friend.

Frances stated she was married at the age of 21 to a Jewish man she met in college. Of that marriage, she stated:

We liked each other and he was nice... I think I made a good choice to marry a very kind person... we were best friends... he was a pre-med student and so he went to medical school and I put him through 3 years of medical school... he finished and started internship and then I started graduate school and it was at that point that it became clear to me that my primary attractions were to women, and he and I went through a grieving process of ending that marriage... because I really loved him... very deeply and ah... it was a very, very, hard decision for me to make... and that took a couple of years to work that through and we were separated... he continued to help support me through graduate school after we separated... we still communicate... he re-married, had children... so, we both carried on with our lives...

Frances's marriage lasted 7 years.
Frances talked about her present relationship:

We met in the synagogue . . . I was very involved and she was also . . . we actually had met a couple of years before, but she was in this 15-year relationship . . . I always really liked her, admired her . . . and then, she ended that 15-year relationship and at some point invited me for a Friday night dinner and to go to services and I came for dinner . . . she was living in a new home she had just bought, and we started talking and we just never stopped . . . and so, we continued talking, and continued talking . . . and waited around because she needed to do some internal ending of that relationship, and then we got involved in a primary relationship . . . and that was 6 years ago . . . and we had a formal wedding ceremony at our synagogue almost 2 years ago . . . and here we are . . . it's a wonderful story . . .

She adds, “We are very well matched . . . spiritually, emotionally . . . it’s very fulfilling . . . she is a wonderful partner . . . our relationship is everything I would ever want.”

Frances displayed much confidence when engaging in decision making. She seemed to think through situations carefully, usually involving others (i.e., friends, rabbis, medical and mental health professionals), and she engages in prayer and meditation as aids in making decisions. As she talked about positive events in her life, Frances stated:

It’s interesting to me as I think about these events . . . I think they are events that I had more of a hand in choosing . . . rather than things that happened to me . . . and yet, I believe that really it’s in partnership with God that those things happened . . . like, I chose to go to Israel, I chose to pursue a relationship with Kristy . . . I chose to move here . . . and so, these were opportunities that I took and they all involved some risk and some fear . . . I have learned from the past that I make good choices . . . for myself, and even though they are scary, I don’t make choices that are destructive . . . and that 9 times out of 10, in fact, they turn out just to be these incredible experiences . . .

Frances said of her coming out process:

I think that was the most difficult decision I made . . . coming out . . . choosing to leave my marriage . . . because it involved so many people and leaving a very comfortable life for a life that seemed very scary and fraught
with dangers and unknowns . . . an old friend was very helpful to me during this time . . . she was the first person I talked with . . . and it helped just to not be alone with it . . . time was also helpful, being in the process and letting it evolve . . . and I guess in some level my own trust in my ability to make good decisions for myself and that I hadn't made decisions that were dangerous for me or unhealthy for me . . .

She talked about God at that particular time:

God was not part of that process for me . . . I don’t think so . . . if He had been . . . I probably would have thought . . . for God, being a lesbian is . . . a bad thing . . . I think that thinking of God then would have been a detriment . . . at that time Judaism was not supportive of gay and lesbian people, or gay and lesbian relationships . . . so, that would have been another piece of the struggle . . . but if I had had a personal relationship with God . . . a God who I believed as all-loving, then it could have been helpful to me . . . but, I don’t think that’s where I was then . . .

When responding to the different life scenarios presented in the three short stories, Frances seemed to allow herself a full range of emotions and was extremely empathic. She seemed to again rely on friends, community support, professionals, and a spiritual searching to help her navigate difficult situations.

Frances seemed very comfortable with her feelings. Several times during the interview she cried, as she talked about painful as well as joyful events. She spoke of pain, fear, anger, love, passion, and a wide range of emotions. She talked about times of solitude as well as times of connection with others. She spoke of “wishing I had more time to spend understanding and sorting out my emotions and what goes on inside me,” in particular at this time when she is facing life and death. She seems to allow herself to be moved by her own struggles as well as the struggles of others, of the larger community, the world. She is teary as she talks about encounters with God, nature, and other human beings and is moved by the stories that develop.

Frances talked about an experience in which she was deeply moved:

I was at a workshop, there was a break, and I took a cup of coffee and I went outside . . . it was a nice day out but chilly . . . and there was a homeless man
walking up the street carrying all of his things in a bag . . . he looked at me and I looked at him and instead of looking away which I know I could do and not wanting to engage . . . I think this was God . . . came over me and I said . . . "Would you like a cup of coffee?" . . . and he took it and looked at me and it was a beautiful moment . . . and it was a very, very, moving moment . . . for me . . . and I felt like I was with God . . . like I was, an instrument of God at that moment . . . and you know . . . that man did more for me than I ever did for him . . .

Frances also talked about her feelings regarding the state of the world:

I feel very impatient about the state of the world . . . and I know it's not God's work . . . to clean up the environment . . . to be kinder to each other, to feed the children . . . and to end war . . . I mean, these aren't things that God made . . . they are things that people made . . . and I just . . . I feel frustrated and I . . . both on a personal level and on a community level . . . that I'm not doing more . . .

Frances talked about her ways of processing different feelings:

Sometimes I really yell, and I get mad . . . and I just say it out loud . . . I get mad with God and I just let it out because that's what I feel . . . sometimes I journal . . . and try to write out the feelings . . . and sometimes I get more peace and more clarity in that way . . . sometimes I meditate . . . or talk to Kristy or a good friend . . . sometimes I pray, although I think that yelling at God is a prayer also . . . but sometimes I do ask God to help me through something . . .

Frances also shared that her relationship with her partner, with God, and with herself is what nurtures her and what "soothes" her in difficult times. She added:

What's helpful to me are friends and family who are also spiritual seekers . . . for the support and understanding and the not feeling so alone . . . in the process . . . the healing coach that I am working with is a very, very spiritual woman . . . and she is very helpful to me . . . time alone is also very helpful to me and the help that I am getting and I think this is from God . . . I notice the seasons . . . it tells me that nothing stays the same . . . and helps me with my struggle about my own impermanence . . . and my own death . . .

Frances's drawings generated much verbal content. She drew herself holding out her hand and spoke of "not knowing but being receptive." She drew her family outside in the backyard of her childhood home and talked about her father's summer
cooking on the barbecue. Her drawing of God generated the sharing of a dream she had regarding the Hebrew word *orkadash* which means "new light." She spoke of the many types of light and made a connection between the many dynamics associated with God.

Gail

Gail is 30 years old, Caucasian, married, with no children. She is currently in graduate school studying to be a mental health professional. She is an active member of the Catholic Church and has been a Catholic all her life, although there was a period of time during college when she was not actively attending or practicing.

**Theme One: Early Relational Experiences**

Gail grew up with her parents and an older brother. Her parents were divorced after 11 years of marriage when she was 3 years old, after which she lived with her mother and brother. Her mother was Catholic and her father an atheist. Her mother has not remarried; her father remarried immediately after the divorce but was divorced again in 6 months. Gail described her father as absent at first: "My dad did not enjoy being a father to little kids." She talked about the physical and emotional distance between them and the anger that she experienced when she learned that the divorce was a consequence of an affair he had. She stated that after her teenage years, she began to feel closer to her father and that they have a "terrific relationship now." She added that he is "more accepting, and less judgmental." Gail described her mother as "very religious, melancholic, very giving, and somewhat perfectionist." She added that her mother seems to "need support" and that she "feels bad for her." Gail
talked about feeling “caught between her father and mother during the divorce and afterwards” and “feeling really bad for my mom.” She added:

I remember how painful it was for my mom for us to go visit my dad . . . because she was really angry with him . . . very angry . . . and we caught a lot of it . . . my brother and I heard a lot of evil things said about my dad . . . I think it was incredibly hard on my brother . . . he caught so much of it . . . and it was hard enough for me . . . I mean, it was terrible for me . . . and just a very painful experience . . . I don’t really know a family.

Gail talked about her maternal grandparents, especially her grandfather, in a warm and fond way. She stated she was very close to her grandfather, that in general she felt very close to maternal aunts and uncles, and that “they were all a big, caring family.” Gail also talked about her third grade teacher with great fondness: “She was just a warm, really compassionate woman and I loved the way she related to us kids.” She continued, “I had really great relationships in school with all my teachers.”

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

Gail went to Catholic schools from the third grade on. “After second grade my mom said ‘We are going too far from our beliefs and values,’ and that’s when we started to go to Catholic schools.” She added, “So I went to mass everyday, except for Saturdays, and church on Sundays.” She stated:

I did fear this priest while I was from third grade to eight grade . . . we would receive religion classes on a daily basis and went to church on a daily basis and the priest was much older, very traditional in his values and his beliefs and he would teach us religion . . . it was scary . . . I mean . . . I just remember for myself . . . I feared hell . . . I feared the consequences of doing something evil that I would burn in hell for it . . . and I remember him talking one day about when as we got older, like in fifth and sixth grade . . . about if you kiss a boy, if you kiss a girl . . . should be like you kiss a mother or father . . . anything more than that was a mortal sin . . . And at the Catholic church, if it’s a mortal sin, before you confess it, you burn in hell . . . and I just remember . . . oh, my gosh . . . so, no wonder my thinking was pretty black and white . . . I just remember that it was very scary . . . some of the teachings . . . I remember
trying to learn hard . . . trying to please . . . and I remember a lot of anxiety, shame, and a humiliation.

Gail talked about believing and fearing a God that was judgmental and punishing. She talked about how she feared hell and worked hard to receive the rewards that came with "being good." She added, "My first images of God . . . I think are the images from books . . . an older male, with white hair, white beard . . . usually in a big robe and above everybody . . ."

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Gail stated:

When I went to college, I was so sick of going to church every day, praying every single day . . . when you go to college you kind of . . . you actually have your own say . . . and I remember starting at first going to church on Sundays and after awhile not going anymore . . . I said, "This is not for me" . . . and for those four years of my undergraduate, I did not attend church much.

Gail talked about needing the distance to figure things out on her own . . . I needed my own time . . . to question things . . . I don't remember feeling angry at God . . . I just need to do my own searching and exploration . . . kind of figuring out, is this for me or not?

She continued:

Meeting people of different religions, different ethnic backgrounds . . . one of my really good friends my freshman year was an African American male . . . and I remember my grandma reacting more strongly to it than my mom . . . there was suspicion . . . he's not Catholic or anything . . . for myself, I think what I did was talk to myself . . . what do I believe in? . . . what makes sense for me? . . . how does this fit? . . . how does this fit with this other person? . . . just really what feels right for me . . . I was an adult, I can make my own decisions . . . eventually, my view of God began to change . . .

Gail continued to talk about her new view of God:

I see Him as caring, open, nonjudgmental . . . loving, and giving the choice . . . and although God wants us to be with Him, He's willing, he's that loving,
that He’ll let us make that choice . . . and to me that’s really powerful . . . I don’t try to grasp it all because it kind of boggles my mind when I think about it because, I don’t . . . we don’t know a lot . . . so, we go on what we can . . . know about Him through Jesus and His teachings . . . so, I see Him as all-loving . . . all-knowing, and I think He helps us help each other to be the best we can.

She added, “He’s always loving, no matter what . . . no matter what you do . . . no matter what you say . . . unconditional.”

Gail stated that she experiences a comfort, a feeling of safety, a feeling of being really safe . . . I depend on Him . . . I’m a very independent person, but there is something that I need to believe in and then can let go of things . . . it’s with God . . . and so I’ll say a prayer . . . to me that’s very comforting . . . I know that there is this Being that is challenging me in a way that right at that moment I can’t see the long term, or what all this is going to be like . . . but there is a sense of comfort, although there are times when things are really, really, challenging in my life . . . I know that no matter if I say “take a hike” He will always be there.

**Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other**

Gail described herself as a very caring person . . . I think I am very understanding and very open minded . . . thoughtful . . . take out a lot of responsibility . . . I think I’m intense too . . . like, when I’m on a job, or doing something . . . I’m very into what I’m doing . . . and at times it can look like I’m brushing off someone or not caring and it’s just the opposite . . . I think I’m pretty empathic and pretty, you know, loving . . .

Later she added she tends to “be hard on myself and to be perfectionist and to end up being mostly the giver in relationships.”

Gail has been married for 8 months. She lived with her husband prior to their marriage for about 6 years. She described her husband as loving but focused on “himself a lot.” She added, “He is growing and is becoming better able to consider my feelings and my needs in the relationship.”
Gail maintains very close contact with her family and feels that she now has a very positive relationship with both her parents. She talked about a network of family and friends and very positive relationships with teachers and mentors. She did admit that many times she tends “to be the caretaker in relationships,” some of which is changing as she has begun to voice her needs more and is not “so quick to want to rescue people.”

Gail seemed to approach decisions in a very analytical way. Regarding her style, she said, “I try to figure out what the steps are, what needs to be done, how this can be the most helpful and efficient for everyone involved . . .” She talked about prayer and how it helps her to be centered: “I guess I always reflect back to prayer . . . that is the most helpful thing to me.” Gail also mentioned the involvement of family, colleagues, and friends in providing feedback on particular issues she is facing. She discussed the decision to marry her husband and how she looked for congruency in values and the commitment to do the daily work of a relationship. She also explained that she wanted to make the right decision and felt like she gave it as much time as needed to feel right about it.

When considering the three stories, Gail seemed to experience much empathy as well as a full range of other emotions. She incorporated talking with family, friends, clergy, and professional counselors in her approach to deciding what to do. She talked about the need to establish boundaries and confront others, to find advocates, and to gain support from friends and family. In particular, Gail appeared to consider heavily the advice and influence of her priest. When considering sex outside of marriage, abortion, or other dilemmas, Gail felt it was important to get the feedback and understanding of a priest.
Gail spoke openly about her feelings. Several times during the interview she became teary. One of these times was when she spoke of her grandfather’s death; another was when she was “touched by God” during the baptism of a cousin.

Gail talked about her way of dealing with different feelings, usually by sharing them with others, with God in meditation and prayer, and through reflection. She talked about walking as a way of “getting in touch” with herself and with God. She shared conversations with her grandfather during these walks and how she “finds comfort and guidance” from them. She spoke readily of music, prayer, exercise, reading, and nature as things that help her process anxiety and insecurity and help her find peace and joy in her life.

Introspection and a sense of connection with many people marked Gail’s verbal account of her drawings. When talking about herself, she focused on emotional, spiritual, and professional growth and the importance of her relationships. Her family drawing generated talk about extended family and their caring. She spoke of the part they have had in her developmental years. Her drawing of God included Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the comfort of knowing “that’s who I will encounter when I die.”

Heather

Heather is 49 years old, Caucasian, divorced, and a mother of three. She is self-employed as a housekeeper. She has a high school diploma and a couple of years of trade school for a medical secretary certificate. She is a member of a Protestant church and has attended her present parish for the past 9 years. Her father was Catholic and her mother Lutheran, but her parents did not attend any churches, and religion was a point of contention between them. Heather has been to many
Protestant churches and participated in many revivals, from the time she was “born again” until she became a member of the Assembly of God, where she now attends. She said, “I have been baptized Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Assembly of God . . . and it doesn’t matter what religion, as long as we preach God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.”

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Heather grew up with her mother and father, a twin sister, and two other sisters. Her parents divorced when she was 14 after her father had an affair. Her father remarried and she stated he “has a second family now . . . three more girls.” She stated that her parents “fought a lot . . . especially about religion.” She described her father as an alcoholic and her mother as “having lots of nervous problems.”

Regarding her childhood, she commented, “I don’t remember that much about my childhood.” She went on to mention two incidents in which she was attacked on the streets of her neighborhood, one when she was 10 and one when she was 15. Both times she was stabbed, but “miraculously” she was not raped.

Heather described her mother as

someone who never really vocalized a lot . . . my mom was this beautiful person, but also a weak person . . . my mom was very well loved by a lot of people, and then the divorce came and it changed my mom . . . she became bitter . . . my mom is still a good person, but she is under psychiatric treatment and I think she’s overmedicated.

She described her father as

someone who hollered a lot . . . I think my dad tried to really be a dad to the point he knew how to . . . but he had a lot of messed up stuff in his background, too . . . and the alcohol did not help.
She added: “There was a lot of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse in his family.”

Things become somewhat confusing for Heather as she talks about her own sexual abuse:

There was something about me and my dad . . . I don’t know what happened . . . but my dad has been proven that he has sexually abused . . . so it’s gross . . . It’s something that I have dealt with to the point I knew that something happened, but I didn’t know what is was . . . but I have forgiven him . . . but it has affected a lot of the girls in the family . . . where there is a lot of bitterness . . . I tell them, the only way you’re going to have peace is to forgive him . . . I never call him “Dad” . . . always call him “Richard” . . . you need to forgive him . . . until you can forgive him and not bring it up . . . I won’t bring it up . . . God helps you with that . . . you give it to God and you let go of it.

Heather stated she had friends in school but that she “hated school after third grade.” She explained:

We went from the Catholic school to the public school, and my twin sister and I were put in the fourth grade where we were supposed to be, and we only lasted there a short time and they came right to us, both of us, and I will never forget it, it was devastating . . . and took us literally out of the fourth grade class, in front of all our classmates and said that we were not bright enough to stay in fourth grade, we had to go back to third grade . . . and my sister and I hated school from there on.

Heather did not remember any relationships with teachers or friends. The only family relationship she remembered was with her maternal grandfather who “sometimes took us to the Lutheran church.”

**Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences**

Heather stated her early images of God were of “a beautiful God . . . just peace and love.” She talked about a feeling of warmth whenever her grandfather took her and her sisters to the Lutheran church. In contrast, she talked about her experience in the Catholic school. She said, “I never liked going to the priest for confession, and the nuns were mean to us.” She added that her parents “forced us to
go to the Catholic church, but they themselves did not go and they did not live it.”
She stated there were no religious practices at home.

**Theme Three: Present God Representation**

Heather spoke of a God who is “my alpha and omega... my husband today
... He’s my father, He’s also my son’s father... He’s my life... He has pulled me through a lot...” She added:

Life is nothing without God... I really try to be obedient to Him... in regards to putting Him first in all the things in my life... I really feel the Lord has a mighty plan for my life in regards to presenting the gospel and testimonies... I really feel God turning my life around and John’s... and that John and I will have a mighty testimony to share with others... about what God has done in our lives...

Heather talked extensively about miraculous intervention from God. She talked about having been healed of severe back problems during a revival series as well as being “released from the habit of smoking” in one night and one prayer. She stated, “He touched so mightily; that’s when He became real to me.” Heather went on to describe God as

such a big God that we cannot explain... he’s such a big God that... we can’t... He sent His son to die for us... a beautiful God, a beautiful person... He knows all things from beginning to end... how do you explain that? Like the song from the wings on the birds to the bees... we can’t imagine and fathom... what God is...

**Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other**

Heather described herself as

a loving, caring person... people say I’m light... my name means light... people say I have a bubbly personality [laughs]... and that’s where I wanna be... I wanna be that person that people look at as cheerful and glowing and caring and loving.
Heather stated that

God brings light and sunshine and brightness into my life, but when I hear the things my ex-husband is doing ... like talking about marrying someone else ... then it's almost like a shadow ... darkness that wants to come and rob it ... my joy, my light, my brightness.

She spent a lot of time talking about her ex-husband and how she longed to be complete in that relationship.

Heather has been separated from her ex-husband for 3 years and divorced for 2. They were married about 14 years but separated several times during the marriage. She stated the divorce was not something she agreed with and that she did not believe divorce was "something God approved." She added, "As far as God is concerned, we are still married." Heather also stated that "God's plan is for women to be submissive ... that's Biblical ... you have to learn to look at the word submission in the Bible as good ... for as long as we are following God's plan, then it's good."

Heather stated she quit school at the age of 16 and got a job to help support her mother and sisters. She and her twin sister became pregnant nearly at the same time, around the age of 17. She explained that her boyfriend did not want the baby and she was devastated. She said, "My sister, who had just been with her boyfriend probably not even a year, went on to get married and I didn’t ... that was a devastating time of my life ..." She added:

I stayed home until I had the baby and she was 6 months old, and then I went and I got a job, and then I got a place of my own and then shortly after that I met John [ex-husband].

Heather also mentioned that right after she had her daughter, she learned that her child's father was marrying one of her friends:

When I learned that, I just went out and had an affair ... one night ... it was actually their wedding night ... [laughter] ... and I became pregnant ... so,
I went out and had an abortion... I’m not proud of it, but I didn’t know what else to do.

Heather described her marriage as a turbulent one. She talked about verbal and physical abuse as well as betrayal on the part of her husband. Nevertheless, she was focused on re-establishing the relationship and stated that she believed “God brought us together... this was a marriage he had planned for me...” Heather stated she believes God has a mate for us and that her wedding “was a wedding with God.” Heather cried as she shared that her ex-husband has a serious relationship at the present and has just announced his wedding to his fiancée. Heather believes God can intervene and that it is God’s plan to bring them back together.

Heather’s 15-year-old son lives with her. Their relationship is centered on church and religious activities. She stated that her main task “is to change the generation sins of the family and give my son a picture of a family.”

Heather described a black and white, concrete process of making decisions. She stated that she just goes “to the Lord... when I don’t know where I am going, what I am doing... I say, ‘God give me some answers... where I am going, what I am doing’...” She talked about the decision not to ask for financial compensation during her divorce. She said:

I was praying and fasting for answers from God... when God asked me to give it all up to let John have it all... I didn’t understand, but I do understand that he was brought up in a wealthy family and material things meant a lot to him... it was a hard decision to go to the court and just show the love of Christ and knowing that God is my provider... that John wasn’t... and that I was willing to let go of it all... to show even the love I had for John... unconditional love...

Heather added that she hears God’s voice like “a human voice,” instructing her on what to do.
When responding to the three stories presented, Heather followed the same pattern of thinking. She relied heavily on faith and prayer “that God can turn things around and take care of everything.” She did not seem in touch with emotions as she considered the different situations. Her responses were usually informed by the concrete parts of her faith system.

Heather seemed very uncomfortable with the realm of emotions. Several times when the subject was painful she resorted to laughing and joking as a way of dissipating the feelings. She talked about “just giving it to God” and “no use dwelling on things” as a way of dismissing or pushing aside her emotions. She was teary a few times when talking about God and knowing now that God answers. Heather seems to deal with her emotions by praying, singing, reading the Bible, and attending church as often as possible. She talked about her response to discussing the sexual abuse:

One of my stepsisters . . . she blew up at me one time . . . it’s like she wanted to know . . . “Did he do these horrible things to you like me, too?” . . . I said, “Mary . . . I can’t listen to that . . . I’m sorry . . . I can’t help you with that” . . . It was almost like she wanted to make me feel . . . bring me down to where she was at . . . I said, “I won’t . . . I won’t go there, Mary . . . You know, I have dealt with what has happened in my life . . . you have to deal with it” . . . she’s been in a lot of treatment programs . . . she’s just gone through . . . really messed up . . . [laughter] . . .

Heather’s drawings were marked by opposite images. She spoke of herself as being and bringing “light and brightness,” but stated that “shadows and darkness are wanting to overcome me.” She was referring specifically to her husband’s remarriage and how it affected her. When drawing her family, she drew herself and her sisters “as a group” and talked about how “we stuck together for protection” and “we were more like one.” Her drawing of God “did not work out.” God was simply “too big, awesome, powerful,” to be drawn. She spoke of seeing herself covering her eyes, like Moses, because of God’s brightness and power.
Ingrid

Ingrid is 48 years old, married, and a mother of one. She is employed full-time at an elementary school as a school bus driver. She has a high school diploma and has attended college. She has been a member of a Methodist church for about a year, but she prefers to be called simply a Christian.

Ingrid stated that prior to this time she had not really attended church:

I prayed for a long time ... faithfully ... last fall I went into what I would call a downward spiral ... I was sick spiritually ... emotionally ... and physically ... by the end of the year ... I was kind of scraping the bottom of the barrel ... I was really down and out ... I went to my doctor and started going to counseling again ... and I had an experience in the night of just being in my bed awake and hearing the words “I love you” ... and it was from God ... it changed my life ... and from that point on ... not only did I hear the words, I felt such warmth ... and such a feeling of love that I had never felt before ... from that point on I started going to church ... I have to go to church just to praise God because I have been changed! ...

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Ingrid stated she grew up with her parents, older stepbrothers and stepsisters, and a younger brother. Both her parents were previously married and had children from those marriages. Altogether there were six siblings. She stated her parents were older when she and her brother were born.

Ingrid indicated she comes from “a pretty dysfunctional family.” Her father was an alcoholic, whom she described as “a weekend drunk ... he died as a result of his alcoholism before I was 40 ... liver failure.”

I was my father’s only daughter ... I guess I was fortunate because he loved me kind of in a way the other kids didn’t get ... until I was old enough to start putting things together ... so, I had some good bonding with him in my real early years, which I am very thankful for.

Ingrid described her father as
outgoing... even when I was a little bit older he would take me with him, I mean, I think that I was probably a substitute for what mom wouldn’t go with him... I went to uncles and aunts and fishing with him... I even remember him taking me to some adult parties... not that I drank or did anything like that... I probably got put to bed... he would take me with him rather than my mom...

Ingrid stated that after kindergarten her father began working different hours and she didn’t see him as much anymore, since he was mostly drunk on weekends.

Ingrid described her mother as

a homemaker who showed love more by doing than by being... it was most important to her to make sure that we were fed all the time... she was not an affectionate person... hugs and kisses were not something that were common in my home... she was depressed for a good share of the years that I was growing up, and I think a lot of that related to her diabetes and having my brother and I at the stage of life she did... she was probably exhausted all the time... when I think about being a diabetic... married to an alcoholic... why wouldn’t you be worn out all the time?... back then I thought she was just being lazy... because I would come home from school and she’d be sleeping and she stayed home all the time... she never went anywhere... she did not drive... she did not attend church... she didn’t come to our school functions and she just isolated herself... even from family members, from neighbors.

Looking back at her childhood, Ingrid stated:

I have good and then very bad memories... I remember fond memories of going places with my dad as a very small child and enjoying his love and affection... and I have some very bad memories of the embarrassment and shame that went along with him being an alcoholic... I have had to work through some anger at my mother for allowing it...

She added:

When I was older, my dad was not working second shift anymore... he was working days... so he’s home all evening and he was just very verbally abusive... he just seemed to hate the world... and... I mean, the term we always used is he was “raising hell”... it’s just what it felt like... it was like living in hell because he was just so mean... I don’t remember him ever hitting me... well, I remember him spanking me when I was real small... but the words he threw at us were just awful... you know, things that you would never think about calling a child that you loved, you know... he
referred to our whole family as parasites . . . and a lot of other words . . . we
were nothing but a bunch of G. D. parasites . . . [tears]

Ingrid stated that both her grandfathers died before she was born and that
both her grandmothers died before she was 5 years old. She did not remember being
close to any family members but stated she had some friends in the neighborhood and
that she enjoyed being with them, although in retrospect she says, “We were all from
dysfunctional families.”

Ingrid said that she

found out when I was in my late twenties that my parents had never been
married, and I took my parents and got them married . . . they were older and
ill and it was a most unusual situation . . . it was kind of strange to watch my
parents say “I do” . . . and to find out they had been together all these years
and they were not married . . .

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

Ingrid stated that

Mother sent us to Sunday school down the street . . . Methodist church . . .
and I did have a cousin that lived in town and her and I frequently went to
Sunday school together . . . but I don’t have any memories of it . . . I
remember also going to a girl’s group called Pioneer Girls at the Baptist
curch, and we would go to vacation summer Bible school . . . and also
summer camp through that church . . . my parents didn’t go to church . . .
they sent us . . . and it was at this church that I first had the inclination to want
to be saved . . . I remember going with the minister into the balcony of the
church and praying and I wasn’t baptized in immersion or anything . . . but
from that point, I prayed on and off.

She talked of thinking of God as “this bearded white-haired man sitting on a
throne somewhere up there . . . shaking His finger . . . the condemning God . . . that’s
the big parent in the sky . . . that’s what I thought of God as a child . . . and I was
afraid.”
Theme Three: Present God Representation

Ingrid said:

I went from God being the big condemning man in the sky to thinking of God only as a power . . . a faceless power . . . that was the only way I could imagine God . . . that was the only way I could imagine a God that was not condemning me . . . to knowing a God that loves me . . . that gives me my free choice . . . and I am beginning to know He loves me no matter what those choices are . . . even if I make the bad choices, God still loves me and I am experiencing that love . . . and have come to know God as a friend more so than a ruler or a power . . . and a friend that I'm able to talk to and be present with and a friend that can give me comfort and help me through things that I can't get do on my own.

She continued:

At this point I can't imagine ever turning my back on God . . . because God has been such a presence in my life . . . a long time . . . even when I was in my downward spiral . . . I can see now, He was there . . . I just can't imagine being without God.

Ingrid talked about how therapy helped her to connect with a God that was not shaming and punishing. She said that “finding my own worth helped me to find a loving God.” She now described God as “love, all-knowing, all-caring . . . as light.”

Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Ingrid described herself as

thoughtful, caring, honest . . . and too analyzing at times . . . outwardly I guess I am somewhat assertive . . . I've realized in recent months that I am . . . I've been gifted somewhat with ministering to other people and have somewhat of a peace-making gift also . . . inwardly . . . I can be self-condemning . . . hard on myself . . . it's something that I am working on . . . I'm in a place of learning to let go . . . learning to just let life unfold rather than trying to control my destiny.

Ingrid stated she dropped out of school at 16. She took a job baby-sitting and living with a family for a year, which was “my first experience with a real family.”
then decided to go back and finish high school. She indicated she was a very
“troubled teen . . . went into drinking . . . was very rebellious . . . ran around with a
total wrong crowd for awhile . . . I was abusing alcohol and marijuana.”

After graduation I started partying some more and got jobs . . . lots of jobs . . . quite jobs . . . nothing seemed to have any satisfaction . . . got married at
19 and thought I was going to be happy now that I had my own life, my own
place . . . [laughter] . . . the husband I had was just the opposite of what my
came also from a very dysfunctional
came from a very dysfunctional
father was . . . he was meek and mild . . . I had to mother him . . . he needed growing up . . . and since I had
grown up fast, we kind of worked together pretty good . . . for awhile . . . I
parented him and he loved me . . .

She added:

I ended up divorcing him . . . I left him for another man . . . I was probably
married a year and a half when I left him for another man . . . and I lived with
the other man for a few months . . . it wasn’t working . . . and I called my
ex-husband up and said, “Can I come back?” and he was waiting for me . . . I
thought, “How sad that he wants that much that he’s willing to put up with
anything . . . how sad” . . . so I went back to him, stayed together just a very
short time . . . that’s when I started doing drugs . . . shortly after that I got a
job and a guy that I had dated before came back into my life and he did drugs
and that was how I got started . . . actually, I got exposed to amphetamines
from my mother; she used them . . . they were sold in the form of prescribed
diet pills . . . and she is the one who actually got me started on those . . . she’d
say . . . “I know you’re tired . . . here, take one of these . . . you’ll have some
energy . . . will pep you up” . . . and then I got pregnant from the man that did
drugs with me . . . I was 22 years old . . . what am I going to do now? Well,
here’s my ex-husband still waiting in the line and I married him again . . .
[sigh] . . .

Ingrid stated that after the birth of her son she was very depressed and started
going to counseling. Through the counseling she

broke away from my husband completely and stopped doing drugs . . . I then
prayed for a man to love my son as his own . . . God sent that man to me . . . I
met my present husband on my 25th birthday and we were married a year
later. He adopted my son.

Ingrid stated, “We get along well . . . we enjoy each other’s company a lot . . . he has
a wonderful sense of humor . . . hardly a day goes that we don’t laugh together . . .

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it’s just so nice . . . to experience joy.” Ingrid and her husband have been married 23 years.

Ingrid described a very positive and fulfilling relationship with her son who is now 25 years old. Several times during the interview she talked about how her love for him helped her change her life. She talked about having positive relationships with her stepchildren and with a couple of special female friends.

Ingrid seemed to approach situations with a certain calm and confidence. She usually resorts to prayer for guidance and for dealing with her own insecurities. She talked about consulting with others, including professional counselors, as a way of getting understanding, insight, and guidance. She spoke of listening to the “teachings along the way” and how she can continue to learn and grow. She mentioned the future and how she is searching for a more fulfilling job or career. She said she did not know “how things are going to unfold,” but she was trusting that she would be able to sort things out and to arrive at a decision that is good for her.

When responding to the three stories, Ingrid seemed to exercise much empathy and to incorporate a variety of help sources as she considered the different options. Personally, Ingrid has made use of therapy and Eastern meditation to help her in decisions regarding her life and to help her in the change process.

Ingrid seemed to share her feelings freely. She discussed feelings regarding herself, God, and others in her past and present. She spoke of practicing meditation and of journaling on a regular basis. She seemed to allow herself a wide range of emotions, from joy to anger, from fear to contentment and peace. She talked about getting close to nature because I feel a sense of God’s presence in nature that I don’t experience in other places . . . whether it be in the woods or next to the water that’s flowing, or the lake, the stream, or under the stars or in the sunlight . . .
Ingrid talked about her low self-esteem in the past and her difficulties in seeing herself as lovable. She spoke of “the lies, the adultery, the drugs” in her past, and she looks at the changes and who she is today. She seemed mindful of where she has been and shared fully the joy of “recovery” and finding new meanings.

Ingrid’s drawings were marked by images of healing and warmth. When describing herself, she spoke of contentment and warmth. She, like some of the other participants, drew her family as a “wished for fantasy.” Her parents were “thinner” and emotionally close to one another. This generated many memories related to how things really were when she was growing up. Her drawing of God focused on God’s warmth and rays of radiation that penetrate and heal.

Julie

Julie is 30 years old, Caucasian, and single with no children. She has a Ph.D. and holds an administrative position at a university. She considers herself Catholic, although she states she does not attend church regularly. Julie remembers going to church on a weekly basis when she was very young and also going to catechism classes. Her family started to distance from church around the time she entered school, and in her teenage years, her father rejected organized religion and Julie herself questioned and rejected it also. Julie has attended church sporadically and is just now beginning to wonder about church and a deeper relationship with God.

Theme One: Early Relational Experiences

Julie grew up with her parents, a sister, and a brother who were 10 and 11 years older. She stated her father worked a lot and was not home very much; when she was 3 years old her mother also returned to work. Julie remembered being taken...
care of by her sister and brother, who were teenagers at the time. She stated that once her mother began working, she did not see her much either, because she worked afternoons and evenings. Later, in her late adolescence, Julie’s mother changed her work schedule to days, and she said they developed a close and positive relationship.

Julie stated:

I think both my parents are workaholics . . . I seriously do . . . I think my dad works a lot . . . and he doesn’t have any leisure activities that he participates in . . . and he chooses not to . . . I really think that he chooses that . . . in some ways he chooses that, but in some he didn’t have a choice . . . I think he liked to work 7 days a week . . . he just worked all the time.

Julie described her father as “caring, kind, hardworking, and very honest.” She added that he is very interested in her success and that she feels she can always go to him for advice. Julie described her mother as “warm, very caring, supportive, and intelligent.” She added that both her parents have a “high work ethic” and that they have been very supportive of educational pursuits. Julie started laughing: “I got a job at 15 and I began working all the time . . . weekends . . . and all . . . [laughs] . . . everyone was working . . . I wanted to work too.”

Julie stated she had a “good childhood and a good family.” She had “lots of friends” and that her house was always “the center of the neighborhood.” She described herself as being a “kind of a tomboy” and told how she spent her summers playing sports with the neighborhood kids and with her brother. She remembered holidays as a high time, when her family was together for meals and celebrations. She stated that both sets of grandparents died either before she was born or shortly after. She remembered aunts and uncles and occasional visits with them. In particular, she described a very close relationship with one of her maternal aunts, who died just recently. Julie stated she was a “very good student” and that she enjoyed a good relationship with teachers and peers. She also feels very close to her brother and,
despite some difficulties in the past, she feels she has a positive relationship with her sister.

**Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences**

Julie spoke of remembering

my mom’s nativity Christmas set . . . and playing with it . . . I remember her not wanting me to . . . she had these little figurines in a manger that she put out at Christmas time . . . and I remember there was little Jesus and the little manger and little animals and I remember playing with them . . . there is an angel that I really liked . . . and I remember she put it up high and I could just touch them . . . and I remember her allowing me to touch them but also I remember her explaining to me what they were . . . but also kind of telling me these are very fragile . . . you shouldn’t be playing with them . . . I kind of learned they were important.

Of her catechism classes, Julie said, “I think I was confused then . . . I think I didn’t quite get who God was and all the different terms used for Him . . .” She added:

To me . . . I felt God was a man . . . that was very kind . . . like the man that the Catholic church holds . . . with longer hair . . . he was very kind . . . and gentle and open . . . and always there to kind of like protect . . . like a safety . . . always feeling very secure and safe that everything was going to be okay even when it wasn’t . . . always very warm thoughts about it.

Julie stated she remembered feeling that her parents felt “guilty” about not attending church regularly at first. Later, in her teenage years, she remembered talking with her father about religion and agreeing that there was not much that was gained through organized religion. She felt her father grew up in a “very strict, very devout Catholic family” and that he became tired of that. She also added, “It felt that in church they were always asking for money.” There were no religious rituals at home, but the family always observed religious holidays by attending church. Julie
added that her family’s spirituality was demonstrated in the way they cared for each other and the immediate family and their care for the social issues around them.

**Theme Three: Present God Representation**

Julie spoke of a God who is “very warm and caring ... warm ... and safe.” She added, “Even in the hard times I can picture myself crawling up and getting a hug ... and seeing like ‘Okay, it’s going to be all right.’” Julie talks about “using my mom’s prayer book a lot” as a way to pray and connect with God. She stated, “This is very comforting to me ... sometimes I just crawl in my bed with my mom’s prayer book ... and I feel safe and cared for.” She also talked about her Aunt Lucy as her “guardian angel” and feeling safe and nurtured by the knowledge that she is with God and watching out for her. She added, “Sometimes when I am confused, I ask my Aunt Sally to show me some kind of sign.”

Julie talked about her continued ambivalence with the Catholic church and its connection to God. Concerning times when she is scared, she said:

I probably go and practice in a church more frequently ... and that’s when I feel guilty ... because I feel like I’m coming when I should have been coming all along ... but I feel I’m more connected when I go in those kinds of situations ... and I feel like I’m asking always for something when I’m going ... so that’s a pull ...

Julie went on to talk about how to her religion is not necessarily going to church. She talked about others, including extended family members, who go to church every week and who treat others cruelly. She said:

Religion means I’m good to people and that I, in my every day life, try to recognize when I am contradicting myself and try to be aware of that ... church is not religion is what I practice myself ... it’s that I am grateful to things daily and that we care for each other and I care for other people that not always have the things I have ...

She continued:
For me, it’s more important to like... do kind things for others... for example, last year, I had this elderly couple that lived across the hall from me... and the wife was dying of liver cancer and they were both in their 70s so I’d go there on weekends and I’d clean for them and I’d take them things or make some fruit or just try and go and visit them because they were very lonely... and then she did die and I went and kind of looked after him... and went out for breakfast with him and I felt that it was like sort of my religion and my own time with God... I view myself as a more practical type of person... like, church is fine for me but it doesn’t necessarily make me feel like I’m any closer to God... I need to be good to other people or just recognize that other people are oppressed or educate other people about it... those kinds of things are more important to me than just going through the motions of it... I know I’m torn... I’m guilty a lot... I should just go there [church]... but I don’t always get the rewards I get with other things that I do for other people... I’m also uncertain about which religion... really... maybe I’ll figure it out someday...

Julie talked about “praying and spending some time meditating every morning and every evening.” She also talked about taking time on Sunday morning to meditate and pray and focus on spiritual things. She talked about her faith that when “my efforts are exhausted, some other higher power can come and move the mountain.” She talked about how difficult it was for her to make the decision toward this present relationship and how her trust in God helped her through the anxiety she felt and continues to feel about sharing herself so closely with the other. She said, “My faith helped me... at one point I just kind of let go and trusted that this was going to be okay.”

Julie shared her present image of God in the following way:

There is sunshine and my Aunt Lucy is with Him... she is kind of right there with Him... like He plays the big part but she’s always informed... and He is kind of looking down at my parents, me, my boyfriend... and He is looking down and smiling.

She added that she feels she would struggle if “something terrible” would happen, like the death of one of her parents. She said, “I would really be angry, confused, and feel abandoned by God... yet I feel that regardless... I would be okay in the end.”
Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other

Julie described herself as a very optimistic person... I have a sense of humor... I’m strong, independent, stubborn, pretty determined... I feel like I set my mind to something and I can accomplish it and I will make it work no matter how hard it is... I’ll find a way to do it... I’m also caring, sensitive... I would never survive in the business world... my heart is too sensitive... I sometimes personalize things that don’t need to be personalized... I don’t always show that to people, but I’m very soft hearted... conscientious.

Julie went on to describe herself in two dichotomous ways: one that is “always on the go and running... always busy... always with a smile on my face, even if I’m busy... just running, running... [laughter]...” and one that is “peaceful and relaxed.” She added, “I think both are me because I am driven but just recently I have learned to take time to relaxed and just be.” She then talked about taking time to develop deeper relationships and mentioned a couple of friends she feels very close to.

Julie went on to say that just until recently, she was “on a fast career track” and all she thought about “were my goals and reaching higher.” She talked about how the beginning of a romantic relationship with someone she has known for a long time has “forced her to evaluate her life.” She added that she has spent all her time up to now working hard at school and different jobs and starting her career and that she has never had a long-term relationship. In fact, she stated she has “never really felt very deep for anyone until now.” She is now unsure how to navigate her life in view of having to balance self and other. She said:

I would like to balance career with my personal life... I would like to... I do keep a pretty fast pace in some ways... I would like to keep that... but my personal life may slow me down... because I would like to probably get married in the next couple of years... and I don’t know... I think I need to
re-evaluate career in some ways, because I don’t think that if I just do all
career that I will be very happy.

Until recently, Julie’s sense of herself was very much related to her accomplishments
and the professional goals she set for herself. She described the relationship with her
boyfriend as “very mutual and fulfilling.”

Julie talked about trusting that she will “make good decisions.” She usually
asks for the feedback of her parents as well as others and tends to “take her time
considering all options.” She added, “I usually am not very fast . . . I like things to go
slow . . . so I take my time.” She gave the example of deciding on a more committed
relationship with her boyfriend:

I looked at the values, the past we have shared and his commitment to me so
far . . . I talked to my parents, my brother, and friends . . . I prayed about it
and asked for guidance . . . I considered my fears and talked about my feelings
with my boyfriend . . . and we worked through it together.

When responding to the short stories presented in the interview, Julie often
responded with, “I would reach out to as many people as I could . . . talk it out . . .
go to counseling . . . talk to a priest . . . pray for guidance . . .” She also seemed to
experience much empathy as she considered the real-life situations and often put
herself in the place of the other women. She talked about “trusting I would be guided
to a better place . . . guide as to what I should do.”

Julie talked openly about the fact that she learned to deal with emotions by
“just working hard.” She gave several examples of how during adolescence, college,
and graduate school she dealt with difficult emotions by working more. She talked
about working 60–80 hours a week when she was in graduate school. She said:

When things were rocky . . . the way I coped is . . . I went to work . . . like, I
got more jobs . . . [laughing] . . . I took more classes and I like . . . ended up
working in a hospital 40 hours a week, having an assistantship for 20 and
adding another research position for 10 . . . I was working like 80 hours a
week . . .
She added, “When I feel . . . I think I always go back to working hard . . . when I feel vulnerable or hurt . . . or scared . . . I go to work.”

Julie talked about her recent change and how she was now taking the time to “just be” and feel her emotions and “know that I’m okay.” She talked about learning that she is more than her accomplishments, that she is a “very caring person” and that “people are more important . . . caring about other people.” Julie seemed to be experimenting with the idea of having a self while maintaining intimacy with another. Julie spoke about the newness of this self that is not “measured by my accomplishments.” She talked about how “difficult it is to a sense of contentment.” She said, “I don’t always trust that it’s going to last . . . it seems that I’m not always content in happiness . . . I’m now practicing being restful and content . . . and not just trying to fill some void.”

Julie seemed capable of deep emotions as she considered the lives and experiences of others in pain. She allowed herself to be touched by the three stories and expressed deep empathy for the women in the stories.

Julie’s drawings were marked by talks of change and ambivalence. She spoke of the “two me’s” and how lately she is trying to achieve a balance between high-achievement drives and relaxation and relationships. Her family drawing generated many memories related to parents workaholism, peer relationships, and the roots of her own sense of drive. Her drawing of God brought memories related to her aunt that died and comforting feelings about God and her aunt “looking down and smiling.”

Summary

This chapter has presented a selected sample of participant data arranged into the themes of Early Relational Experiences, Early God Representation/Religious
Experiences, Present God Representation, and Relational Dynamics of Self and Other. These four themes emerged through the clustering of invariant constituents identified from the data. In the following chapter, Conclusions, the themes will be outlined again, together with the invariant constituents that generated them.

Based on the above themes and according to Moustakas (1994), a Composite Description of the themes was developed, which contains the meanings and essences of the development and function of the God representation and which applies to the group of participants as a whole. The Composite Descriptions will be discussed in the next chapter, as well as the two distinct groups that emerged from the analysis. The use of tables, diagrams, and poems constructed directly from the interview data will be used to aid comparisons of the two groups and to note similarities and differences of the two groups. Selected quotations from each of the interviews will also be used to illustrate points the participants have emphasized and to support the researcher’s analysis of the data.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must therefore, take them as we experience them. And if such experiences help to make your life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfying to yourself and to those you love, you may safely say: This was the grace of God.

—Carl G. Jung

Overview

This chapter presents general observations regarding the results of this research, the invariant constituents that composed the clustering into the four themes (Moustakas, 1994), the two groups that emerged from the themes, the Composite Descriptions of the essences of the experience for the group of participants as a whole, research questions and answers, implications for therapy, implications for future research, and final thoughts.

General Observations

The Participants

All final 10 participants in this research acknowledged a belief in a God. This was true even though the research announcement made it clear that a belief in a God was not necessary, only the willingness and ability to talk about the God one did or did not believed in. All respondents and those interviewed are Caucasian, with the exception of one, whose interview could not be used in the final analysis (for
explanation, please refer to page 50). Aside from these factors, there are distinct differences among the participants. They come from different levels of education and a variety of careers, and they represent a wide spectrum of chronological ages. Among the participants, there are those who are or were married, divorced, or never married. Of the 10 participants, 9 were heterosexual and 1 was a lesbian. They represent six different religious denominations and, although some are struggling to define or redefine their relationship to their churches, they all voiced being deeply committed to a relationship with their God as they understand Him/Her.

Consistency of the Research Results

All of the research participants indicated that they found the researcher’s understandings of their answers to be accurate. When the researcher checked by summarizing the information and asking for participants’ feedback at the conclusion of the interviews, none of the participants felt that any crucial aspect of their belief and their history had been omitted. Several of the participants commented on the extensive nature of the questions and how it made them think deeply about their lives and their belief in their God. The time spent with participants and the participants’ own voice were used as measures of credibility of the research findings. Confirmation by the participants, checking and rechecking data for a rival hypothesis, and the researcher’s awareness of her own biases through the use of memos were used as measures of dependability and confirmability. Detailed descriptions of the participants, the settings, and the concepts guiding the research were used as aids in assessing transferability of findings.

It is important to note that because of its length, only a fraction of the extensive details of each of the 10 participants’ transcriptions could be presented
within the results of this research. The depth of the responses, both in the scope of areas covered as well as the detailed information about each area offered by the participants, was significant and enabled the researcher to employ a large, relevant database.

It is important to note that all participants found their relationship with God meaningful and useful to them. All of them are deeply committed to their faith and their faith understandings. Nevertheless, it was assumed in this research that if a participant were to be aware of her insecure and shamed self representation and how it might be connected with her critical and perfectionistic God representation, that knowledge itself might serve to change the outcome.

The data from the four themes (Chapter IV) emerged from the clustering of the invariant constituents that are here presented under the four themes.

**Theme One: Early Relational Experiences**

**Holding Environment**

This concept introduced by Winnicott (1953) refers to the relational quality of a person’s environment. The presence or absence of “good enough others” who meet the developmental needs of the person is a critical variable in Object Relations theory.

This invariant constituent was developed from the participants’ descriptions of their early life with their significant others. It refers to their memories of interactions, feelings, and thoughts regarding the emotional quality with significant others in their early environment. It is further subdivided into three areas.
Absence/Presence of Others

The absence or presence of others in a child's life is a critical relational variable in Object Relations theory. Six of the 10 participants described an early environment where significant others were mostly absent. These participants described their parents as focused on their own concerns and their family as distant (physically and/or emotionally) from other relatives and from others in general. On the other hand, 4 of the participants described their early environment as populated by many others who were present. They accounted for a list of relatives and friends that were part of their lives and talked about many others who displayed care and attention to them.

Quality of Attachments

No Closeness. Three of the 10 participants indicated they did not feel close to anyone in their childhood years. They were unable to identify anyone they felt cared about them or with whom they felt some emotional closeness. Four of the participants indicated feeling close to one or both parents, and a sibling or a relative. Two of the 4 participants indicated special closeness with their fathers, while the other two reported feeling closeness with their mothers.

Ambivalence. Three of the 10 participants indicated an ambivalent attachment with one or both parents. Two of the participants discussed the alcoholism of their father or stepfather as influencing their attachment. The other talked about her mother's religiosity, perfectionism, and anger as influencing the attachment.
Closeness. Four of the 10 participants talked about a feeling of deep closeness to one or both parents. Two of the participants described such attachment with their fathers, and 2 participants described it with their mothers.

Peer Relationships

Six of the 10 participants mentioned having very few or no relationships with friends. Their accounts ranged from negative experiences of being “picked on,” to “never having a close friend,” to limited and infrequent experiences with peers. On the other hand, 4 participants related they had many friends, ranging from neighborhood kids and school peers, to church and family friends. They described very positive memories with friends and often seemed to remember at least a few by name and with a feeling of fondness.

Trauma Experiences

Physical/Emotional/Sexual Abuse

Four participants indicated having experienced physical and emotional abuse during their childhood. Two of these 4 participants indicated also having experienced sexual abuse.

Death of Parent/Sibling

Two participants’ fathers died. One lost her father in infancy, and the other in late adolescence. One participant lost a sibling when she was a toddler.
Mental Illness/Alcoholism

Four of the 10 participants reported parental alcoholism. All four experiences involved their fathers or stepfathers. Of these, 3 also shared the experience of mental illness in relationship with their mothers. A fifth participant shared about her mother’s mental illness occurring in late childhood.

Divorce

Five participants talked about their parents’ divorce. One participant talked about three divorces and consequently her experiences with three stepfathers. One participant talked about discovering in her 20s that her parents had never been married. Another participant talked about the fact her father had been married previously, therefore the presence of half siblings.

Theme Two: Early God Representation/Religious Experiences

God as Judge

Five participants thought of God as judge. In this role, God rewarded and punished, and fear and guilt was a constant presence in association with this image.

God as Powerful Authority

Three participants thought of God as powerful, all-knowing, and as a supreme authority. These images were associated with lowering anxiety about present and future circumstances and involved trust that ultimately things were going to be okay.
God in the Form of Jesus

Two participants reported an image of Jesus, not God. This image was described as meek, kind, and welcoming. It usually involved memories of Bible stories and, in particular, “felt” used to tell the stories. Pictures of heaven accompanied these memories, and they generated feelings of warmth.

Theme Three: Present God Representation

Loving God

All 10 participants described their present God representation as “loving.” Comments regarding the characteristics of the loving God varied widely, and following are the subcodes that describe the main characteristics of the loving God representations.

Supportive/Constant Presence

Five participants described their loving God representation as a presence that is constant in their lives. They felt supported by God even through “difficult times and difficult experiences.” Their description was suggestive of a loving presence accompanying them through life.

Powerful Authority

Two of the participants described their God as a powerful authority that was all-knowing. For both participants, this belief was associated with lowering anxiety and fears regarding present and future concerns, and relying on God to show and tell them what to do, since He obviously knows best.
**Judge/Controller**

Two participants held a judging God representation. This representation was associated with attempting to do what is right and constantly being on alert to be the best one can be. One of the participants mediated this image with the one of Jesus, whom she saw as accepting and “pleading with the father [God]” on her behalf so she could be forgiven. The other participant saw the judging as more of a teacher who was interested in correcting and changing her.

**Nonempathic/Distant**

One participant held a distant God representation. This representation was marked by no personal involvement and a feeling of a power that was in charge of the universe as a whole, but from whom she did not expect anything. The feeling of the participant was that she does not deserve the attention of this universal power.

**Function of the God Representation**

This invariant constituent refers to comments related to the function of the particular God representation of the participants. Some God representations seemed to include one main function. Other God representations seemed to contain two main functions.

**Calm Fears**

Two participants talked about their God representation in ways that identified its main function as help in dealing with fear, stress, uncertainty, and anxiety related to choices about the present and the future.
Hold the Project of Life (Guide/Support Life’s Choices/Paths)

Five participants talked about their God as a presence that supports and guides their choices. They spoke of the assurance that God was with them and that together they faced the present and the future. There was a certain confidence that God supported them in various ways: through people, circumstances, self-discovery, etc.

Instruct/Correct/Fix

Three participants talked about their God as someone who directly instructed them in what to do and what choices to make. According to them, God was interested in making them and others better. God was also the one who could be expected to work and fix relationships and circumstances. For these participants, there were indications that they were striving to improve the amount of time and effort they dedicated to their God, and that God expected more from them.

Unclear

One participant’s comments did not appear to report any particular meaning or function that her God representation had in her life. Her God representation was distant and impersonal, and she stated that until this interview she had “not thought much about God.” She did speak of “feeling strongly about getting married in the church” because she felt she needed the assurance that God sanctioned her choice and marriage.
Relationship With God

Type

Partnership. Five participants talked about their relationship with God as a kind of partnership. This partnership involved talking and listening and a sense that the Other was always there to support, guide, and provide insight. These participants talked about choices, the present and the future in ways that showed confidence in their decisions, because they were capable and also because they trusted the Other.

Parent/Child. Four participants talked about their relationship with God as similar to a parent-child relationship. The parent (God) knew best and chose when and how to reveal His (all of them held a male God) will. Their job was to discover His will and to meet those expectations. God is the holder of rewards and goodness and delivers gifts according to His will.

Royalty/Peasant. One participant talked about her relationship with God in universal, impersonal ways. God knew her only because “He knows everyone.” Not much was expected from God, but He was simply there overseeing the kingdom as expected of a king or president. God was not questioned or held accountable, and the idea of God as someone she could relate to on a more personal level had not even been conceived.

Focus of the Relationship With the God Representation

Self and Primary Others. Five participants described their relationship with their God and their expectations of Him as relating to matters concerning themselves and their immediate family. They talked about themselves and others in their lives as
needing to grow and improve, and they counted on the help of God to accomplish that purpose. Their focus was on relationships with husbands and children and on their children's future.

**Service to Others/Community.** Five participants described their relationship with their God and their expectations of Him as relating to matters concerning themselves in relationship with their community and the world in general. They talked about their God as related to heightened awareness of the need to reach out to others and to participate in changing the world around them. With their God they seemed conscious of being responsible for making a difference in the lives of others around them and in the world in general.

**Theme Four: Relational Dynamics/Self and Other**

**Self Definition**

**Roles**

Five participants defined themselves based on the roles they played in relationships. The roles of wife and mother were a common role reference. All five had difficulties at first finding adjectives to describe themselves outside of these two roles.

**Values**

Five participants characterized themselves by the values they held, such as honesty, care of others, and friendliness. They talked about "who they were at the core" and about their experience of themselves in relation to others.
Intimate Relationships

Working Relationships

Five participants described their relationships with significant others as relationships that worked. They did not use words that expressed a sense of connection on an emotional level, but they expressed the fact that they were functional in the tasks of living, such as raising children and maintaining a household.

Emotional Relationships

Five participants described their relationships with significant others as emotionally fulfilling and intimate. They used words such as joyful, mutual, warm, close, and rich to describe their relationships with husbands or partners.

Trust Factors

Self-Reliance

Three participants’ comments regarding trust involved a strong reliance on themselves. They talked about few or no others to rely on and about “just doing what is right.”

No Self-Trust

Two participants’ comments indicated they did not trust themselves to navigate life’s choices and difficulties. Accordingly, they did not find many others they could trust. Their comments were marked with, “I didn’t trust myself to know what to do” and “what I want to do may not be right.”

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**Trust Self in Relation**

Five participants’ comments indicated they trusted themselves to make decisions and to navigate present and future difficulties. They seemed to include many people in their circle of support and guidance and in the process of decision making. When they were in difficulty, many others helped and supported them.

**Attachments**

Five participants talked about having few or no significant others to whom they feel close at the present time. On the other hand, five participants talked about having many relationships and feeling close to many people at the present time. They also talked about relationships they have had for a long time. Having such long-term relationships, as with childhood friends, was not unusual. They talked as well about strong ties to biological family and to church family.

**Emotional Awareness**

Five participants discussed little about their feelings and emotional life. Their comments focused on behavior, and several of them mentioned “not spending much time considering how I feel.” Two of them also talked about trying not to “go there.” During the interview, if something were particularly difficult for them to talk about, they tended to laugh nervously and joke about the subject or change the subject quickly. The other five participants spoke freely about their emotions and their internal life. All five allowed themselves to shed tears during the interview, and their vocabulary revealed awareness and comfort with a variety of feelings and feeling states.
The Two Groups

A closer examination of the above invariant constituents and themes revealed the emergence of two distinct participant groups. Group One was labeled "Predictable-Dynamic," given the predictable nature of the self and God representations. Group Two was labeled "Experiential-Dynamic," given the process and unfolding nature of the self and God representations. It is important to note that the depiction of the two groups outlined here represents only a slice in time captured through the interviews with participants at the particular time interviews were conducted. One of the understandings of this researcher is that movement both ways is possible, given new meaning constructions. As new meanings are constructed, one may lean toward one group or another. Since both groups are dynamic, one would expect that participants in both groups would construct and reconstruct meanings about their God representation as their lives continue to unfold. Based on the themes and invariant constituents, a description of each of the two groups as a whole was developed.

Group One: Predictable-Dynamic

Participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group constructed God representations that seem to have a more predictable dynamic with certain characteristics such as that of director and designer. In this dynamic, God is known as following certain patterns and there is a known accompanying appropriate response from the other.

The five participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group described their relational experiences in conservative ways, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Three described their early relationships as abusive, four spoke of father’s absence, and two spoke of being unable to predict a parent’s response to them because it
vacillated between warmth and anger. All five participants of the Predictable-Dynamic group talked about fewer relationships, both early on and presently. All five participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group made statements indicating the absence of a close friend. When talking about peer relationships, four participants talked about being treated unfairly, or being rejected or ignored. When discussing present relationships, all five participants focused on their children. Four participants talked about a significant other in the present, and that relationship was described as “comfortable,” “respectful,” “workable.”

Participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group portrayed themselves using words that described roles they played. All five participants had a difficult time describing themselves and at first focused on the roles of mother and wife. When discussing their future, all five participants usually centered on children and/or their immediate family. None of the five participants talked about future aspirations, and they spoke often of “being unsure” or “seeing things pretty much the same.”

The God-self representations of participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group were more varied than those of participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group. Participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group described their God representations as loving, but they directly or indirectly qualified loving with characteristics such as “judge,” “character molder,” “all-knowing,” “awesome,” and “authority.” One participant in the Predictable-Dynamic group described her loving God representation as “cold/distant” and her self representation as “disconnected.” Two participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group described their loving God representation as “supreme power” and their self representations as “unsure.” Two participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group described their loving God representations as “judging/controlling” and their self representations as “not good enough.” The God-
self representations of participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group seemed to undergo very little change over time.

In relationship to God representation function, one participant in the Predictable-Dynamic group talked about God as “just there.” This participant described her God representation as more distant and in general terms, such as, “He has a relationship with everyone in the universe.” All four other participants talked about God as directing, correcting, and changing them. These same four participants felt that God was in ultimate control of what happens to a person and that God was personally interested in their lives.

The following poem is composed from transcription excerpts by a participant in the Predictable-Dynamic group. It is intended to portray the participant’s voice in relationship to the four themes identified in the analysis: Early Experiences and Relationships, Early God Representations/Religious Experiences, Present God Representation, and Relational Context of Self and Other.

**Beth’s Self-Other Story**  
(poem)

All I wanted was to please  
Please my parents, please my teachers  
I always wanted to do what was right  
The right thing

But I could never be sure  
It seemed God stayed mad  
Just like my mom  
No discipline, just this unspoken disapproval  
It never went away  
I never could be released from it

I remember being depressed  
I said, Lord, just take my life away  
My brother was into drugs  
I had no friends

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My sweetheart had left
But my depression went away
With a new diet, sunshine and fresh air
It just naturally went away

I see God differently now
He's accepting, forgiving, and loving
And He wants to work on my character
He points out things that need changing
Like my diet and exercising

I think I am a light kind of person
I am conscientious
Maybe overly conscientious
I always wanted to do the right thing

Group Two: Experiential-Dynamic

Participants in the Experiential-Dynamic Group constructed God representations that seem to have a more experiential dynamic with certain characteristics such as consultant and partner. In this dynamic, God is experienced as a presence and the relationship with God is experienced as an unfolding process in which the boundaries are not totally yet known.

Four participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group described their early relational experiences as “nurturing,” “loving,” “positive,” and “caring.” Only one participant in the Experiential-Dynamic group reported severe trauma in early childhood. Three others spoke of experiencing some form of trauma in late adolescence, early childhood, or in middle childhood. Despite the trauma, all three spoke of “many caring people around me,” which included friends and family, and “feeling connected” and “cared for.”

Four participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group spoke of positive relationships with peers and keeping in touch “with friends from childhood.” These
four participants talked about having “long-term relationships” and the presence of
many others, both family and friends in their lives. All five participants in the
Experiential-Dynamic group described their present relationships as “fulfilling,”
“intimate,” and “mutual.”

Like participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group, participants in the
Experiential-Dynamic group described their God representations as loving but used
characteristics such as, “guide,” “nurturer,” and “supporter.” All five participants in
the Experiential-Dynamic group described the relationship with their God as a force
that sustains them.

All five participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group described themselves
using personal adjectives, such as “confident, friendly, caring, passionate, open
minded, overly responsible, peaceful, optimistic, positive, independent, determined,
honest, and caring.” When the five participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group
discussed their future, all five mentioned job and career aspirations, community
involvement and meaning in service, and intimate relationships. The God and self
representations of participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group have all undergone
change over time, and all five participants talked about “being in transition at this
time.” This change or transition has usually been influenced by many things: a new
relationship, entering college or graduate school, the death of a family member, and
undergoing therapy.

In relationship to God representation function, all five participants in the
Experiential-Dynamic group talked about God as very present in their daily lives. All
five relied on God for support, guidance, and a feeling of “being held” through
periods of trauma, change, and uncertainty. All five participants talked about “being
partners” with God, referring to what happens in their lives as well as how they can impact the lives of others.

The following poem is composed from transcription excerpts by a participant found in Group Two. It is intended to portray the participant’s voice in relationship to the themes identified in the data analysis: Early Experiences and Relationships, Early God Representation/Religious Experiences, Present God Representation, and Relational Context of Self and Other.

**Debbie’s Self-Other Story**  
(poem)

I remember feeling close to a lot of people  
There were all these people in my life  
A lot of connections

We did a lot of things together  
Outside in the yard  
Planting things in the garden  
Playing with the neighborhood kids  
Listening to dad play the guitar  
And sing his songs

When I am confused or scared  
Sometimes I think about it alone  
Sometimes I talk to other people  
About whatever is happening or how I am feeling  
Sometimes I pray  
And I imagine myself in the middle of a community of people  
Friends, family, and church

I like to think of me as a child of God  
Everything falls away  
That’s who I am on this deep level  
It’s like God is with me  
And all these wonderful, caring people are with me

I am completely whole  
Completely loved  
Completely understood

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Tables 1 and 2, which follow, outline the above areas in more detail for the two groups. They are divided using the four themes. Figure 1 follows, outlining the God-self representations of participants in the two groups. The circles and squares indicate the number of participants that fall into each quadrant. As stated before, participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group stated a more varied God and self representation. This fact can be seen in the Loving God representations described as: "Cold/Distant," "Supreme Power," and "Judging/Controlling," with the accompanying self representations stated as: "Disconnected," "Unsure," and "Not Good Enough." Participants in the Predictable-Dynamic group are represented in the diagram by squares. Participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group described God and self representations that were less varied than the Predictable-Dynamic group. Therefore, participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group are found in only one quadrant: Loving God representation as "Supportive" and self representation as "Confident." Participants in the Experiential-Dynamic group are represented in the figure by circles.

From the previously outlined themes, essences of the experience were drawn which seemed to be relevant to the group of participants as a whole. These are the Composite Descriptions, and in this research, three Composite Descriptions were identified (Moustakas, 1994).

**Composite Description One: The God Representation Is Related to Early Relational Experiences**

As the researcher compared and contrasted the theme related to Early Relational Experiences and the theme related to the Early and Present God
### Table 1

**Predictable-Dynamic Group: Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early Experiences &amp; Relationships</th>
<th>Early Rep./Religious Experiences</th>
<th>Relational Context: Self &amp; Other</th>
<th>God Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 | Mother—physical/verbal abuse   
   Father—early death    
   No closeness, absence of relationships | God—Judge, distant  
   Jesus—Loving, forgiving | Happy, mother, wife  
   Few relationships, focus on children  
   Marital: "good, happy"  
   Black & white, alone, "just do it"  
   Not much exp. w. emotions | God—Judge, distant  
   Jesus—Loving  
   Ambivalence |
| 2 | Mother—angry, always mad  
   Father—loving, warm, accepting  
   Not many others, ambivalent attachments | Judge, unforgiving, mad | Wife, mother, focus on children,  
   Conscientious  
   Few relationships  
   Marital: "good, comfortable"  
   Involves religious figures, consults, prays  
   perfectionism, not good enough | Loving, forgiving, accepting but focused on changing her, her behavior |
| 3 | Mother—present, strong but unable to protect self or children from trauma, 3 marriages  
   Father—brain injury, absent, unreliable  
   Stepfather—loving, close when sober; abusive, distant when not  
   Alcoholic  
   Grandmother—warm, positive, spiritual  
   Aunt—positive, warm | Awesome, big, in charge | Mom, wife, honest, faithful, distracted  
   Few relationships, focus on children  
   Marital: "respectful"  
   Struggles, not sure can trust self to make good decisions, prays, fears, insecurity | Awesome, big, in charge |
| 4 | Mother—mental illness, powerless to protect from abuse  
   Father—absent  
   Stepfather—alcoholic, physical/verbal abuse  
   Absence of positive relative | Distant, non-empathic, no warmth, no personal interest in her | Wife, stepmom, friendly, control-freak  
   Few relationships, focus on having a child  
   Marital: "good"  
   Black & white, alone, "just do it"  
   Emotions not available, afraid to feel | Distant, non-empathic, no warmth, no personal interest in her |
| 5 | Mother—mental illness, powerless to protect from abuse  
   Father—sexual/physical/verbal abuse  
   Absence of positive relationships | Absent | Mother, Christian, loving, caring bubbly  
   Few relationships, focus on son and gaining husband back  
   Concrete, black and white, no self-confidence, denial  
   Disconnection, fragile | All powerful, intervening, specific plans |

*Participants (1–5)
Table 2

Experiential-Dynamic Group: Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early Experiences &amp; Relationships</th>
<th>Early Rep./Religious Experiences</th>
<th>Relational Context: Self &amp; Other</th>
<th>God Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 6 | Mother—present, giving, loving, mental breakdown when she was 12  
Father—supportive, loving  
Stepmother—loving, caring  
Many caring, holding relationships  
Divorce | Loving, some ambivalence about God's presence in her life and world | Kind, caring, many relationships, intimate relationship: “intimate, fulfilling”  
Confident, trusts, prays, involves others  
Fulfillment, freedom, richness, feels centered | Loving, supportive, holding, no face but arms that hold and protect |
| 7 | Mother—present, constant, not too emotional  
Father—loving, warm. Died when she was 17  
Grandmother—warm, caring  
Many caring relationships  
Divorce | Big, rewards and punishments, condemns | Good friend, connection for others, caring  
Many relationships, intimate relationship: “terrific, most fulfilling”  
Confident, trusts, prays, involves others  
Fulfillment, richness, joy, peace, fear, anger, in touch with emotions, feels centered | 1. No God  
2. Universal Force  
3. Loving/Exploring personal relationship |
| 8 | Mother—loving, caring, took care by doing, fragile  
Father—absent at first, later involved. Accepting, nonjudgmental  
Grandfather—loving, accepting  
Other caring relationships  
Divorce | Judgmental, rewards & punishments in charge of hell | Caring, open-minded, understanding  
Many relationships, marital relationship: “comfortable, good friends”  
Involves others, prays, trusts  
Peace, joy, caretaker, insecurities, perfectionism, aware of trying to negotiate self & others | Loving, holding, supportive, guide |
| 9 | Mother—depressive, physical illnesses, emotionally absent  
Father—alcoholic, warm/loving when sober, distant/angry when not. Verbally abusive  
Not many others | Big, rewards & punishments, not very close | Thoughtful, caring, honest, too analytical, sometimes too hard on self  
Many relationships, marital relation: “joyful”  
Confident, trusting, involves others, prays  
Peace, joy, love, warmth, fulfillment, fear, confusion, in touch with emotions | Loving, supportive, comforting, holding |
| 10 | Mother—present than absent, loving, high expectations  
Father—absent, worked a lot, loving, high expectations  
Community of caring people  
Aunt—positive, special relationship. Spiritual | Safe, protector, warm, not sure how personal/relevant, high expectations | Optimist, positive, strong, independent, determined, caring, sensitive | Warm, caring, guide, protector, holding |

*Participants (6–10)
Figure 1. God-Self Representations of Participants.
Representations, it became clear that the participants' early relational experiences served as a prototypical object relationship that set the precedent for their God representation. This finding is supported by many authors who either postulated about this outcome, theorized about it, or determined it through research (Jones, 1996; Jung, 1938; McDargh, 1986; Rizzuto, 1979; Winnicott, 1953). Concerning the essences of this Composite Description, Rizzuto (1979) stated, “Properly investigated, under detailed and careful historical reconstruction, God's representational characteristics can be traced to experiences in reality, wish, or fantasy with primary caretakers in the course of development” (p. 123). Rizzuto wrote in particular about the concept of “mirroring transference” and the concept of “self-object bond” to explain the development of the God representation and its relationship to the need to preserve a cohesive sense of self. Out of the experience of mirroring with the early significant others who make up our earliest sense of self, there develops other representations that support and sustain that early, cohesive sense of self (Rizzuto, 1979). Jones (1996) stated it simply: “Like all relationships, that relationship with what is experienced as sacred is constellated out of the internalized relationships that make up the self” (p. 44). Jones (1996) went on to explain how one comes to know the “ultimate” in different ways, depending on one's actual or internalized relational experience.

As an example of the type of data leading to Composite Description One, consider participant Beth, who grew up with two parents and five siblings. Her mother was a devout Catholic, who is described as present and interested, but who was “angry much of the time . . . she was constantly mad.” Beth stated her mother was not “much of a disciplinarian, but in a way it was worse, because there was no way to please her, to find forgiveness.” Despite the face that Beth described her
father as warm, accepting, and nonjudgmental, Beth’s internalization of the relational experience with her mother seem to dominate her experience of self and other. Her early years were marked by a focus on achievement and perfectionism and an attempt to please others. She seemed unsure of her lovability and acceptability unless she was perfect. Beth suffered from depression most of her childhood.

She remembered the God of her childhood as “a stern God . . . God is this stern judge . . . you better obey him or else . . .” In another place, she said, “I think that’s the God of my mom, the judge, guilt . . .” She also added, “I remember feeling that God stayed mad . . . you go to confession, ask forgiveness, then go back next week and ask forgiveness for the same thing . . . somehow God stayed mad.” Beth went on to talk about how her God has changed from a stern, judging God to a loving, accepting one, which suggests a shift in internal object relations from mother to father. Nevertheless, her God is still focused on changing her, which seems to be at the core of her relationship with her God. When asked about her relationship with God and God’s role in her life, Beth stated:

Well . . . His main activity is helping me to grow and develop just as I try to help my children . . . I guess . . . I think He works on my character . . . He points out things to me, but in a gentle way . . . I think I used to see Him as blaming and shaming . . . but now I see Him more as pointing things out to me without ridiculing me . . . because I think that’s how I used to treat myself . . . ah . . . you did it again . . . kick yourself . . . wherever . . . I don’t see Him like that anymore . . .

When asked about her closest time with God, she responded by describing an incident in which she felt God spoke to her through the testimonies of other people to bring her to pay attention to changes needed in the areas of her health and exercise.

For direct quotations regarding Beth’s dialogue about how she feels God has and is “working on my character,” please refer to pages 73–75. Looking closely at Beth’s description of her father, whom she experienced as warm and loving, and her
descriptions of her mother, whom she desperately tried to please but could never be
sure where she stood with her, Beth’s current God representation, which is loving but
forever interested in making her better, has a clear quality of mother’s as well as
father’s object internalizations.

Participant Esther provides another example of the type of data underlying
Composite Description One. Her God seemed much like the people who permeated
her growing up years: powerful to do what they pleased, good or bad, questionable,
absent and only remotely involved, and not personal. She grew up with her mother,
father, and a sister until the age of 9 when her parents divorced. She then lived with
her mother and sister until age 12, when her mother remarried and the family
expanded to include her mother, sister, stepfather, and his children. Esther
remembered going to church occasionally before the age of 12 with her mother and
sister. Her mother was Protestant. Her father and stepfather were described as “not
religious . . . they never went to church.” Her mother was described as distant and
“unable to protect” her and her sister from the verbal and physical abuse perpetrated
by her stepfather. Her father was described as absent. She did not remember her
growing up years with him and stated in an unclear way:

I don’t remember much from when my dad lived with us, I must have blocked
it out or something . . . and I prefer it that way . . . if I’m blocking it out, then
I don’t want to know . . . I don’t want to know.

Her stepfather is described as an alcoholic who was physically and verbally abusive to
Esther and her sister. He was also verbally abusive to her mother, and she
remembered “always trying to stand up and fight for her.” Her history of relationships
is marked by distance, absenteeism, a lack of warmth, and a lack of control over what
happens.
Esther talked about her God as “everywhere” but not really personally involved with her. She said:

He can do what He wants to do . . . I think He lets things . . . lets bad things happen because . . . they still need to happen . . . and that’s just the way it is . . . ah . . . I think He can do whatever He wants to do . . . I think He is mainly a good God . . . but I think . . . actually . . . no . . . the only reason that He would even be considered bad is, because bad things happen . . . but I don’t really think that that’s bad . . . He lets cancer or stuff like that happen with children . . . dying . . . I just think that’s just the way . . . it’s got to be . . . people have to die . . . well . . .

When asked about her relationship with her God, Esther stated:

I think that He’s there . . . I don’t think that I have a relationship with Him . . . only because . . . I think He has a relationship with everybody . . . I don’t think that I’m not going to go to heaven because I don’t go to church . . . I don’t feel that way . . . but, He’s not a prominent part of my life, I guess . . . He’s there . . . I think He’s there when I need Him to be there . . . but, that’s about it, I guess . . . You’re making me think . . .

When asked what she disliked the most about God, Esther answered in similar manner:

I don’t know that I really dislike . . . I think like I said before there’s that, you know . . . why do people have to die at a young age . . . you know . . . why does that stuff happen? . . . I personally think that it needs to happen and it’s just the way it is . . . just . . . things happen for a reason . . . I don’t know that I dislike that . . . because He lets it happen . . . but, I guess if I had to pick, that might be it . . . Ya . . . that would be it . . .

When asked to draw a picture of God, Esther remarked at first, “I don’t really think that I can draw God . . . He’s invisible . . .” She ended up describing her drawing as a “little light . . .” or something barely perceivable, barely there.

Debbie is another example of what appears to be the relationship between actual relationship history and current God representation. She grew up with her mother, father, and brother until the age of 10 when her parents separated. She then lived with her father, who remarried after the divorce when she was 14. Her family
was Lutheran, and her stepmother was studying to be a minister. Church was an integral part of Debbie’s growing up years and a source of support and connection with many people. Debbie described her mother as present, involved, and warm until she began to get ill. Her mother became paranoid schizophrenic when Debbie was 9. She describes her then as erratic, unpredictable, and mad. After the separation and divorce, she maintained periodic contact with her mother. Her father was described as supportive, invested, and warm, “but not very physical.” Her stepmother was described as warm, loving, and caring. She considered her stepmother her “real mom.” Debbie’s history of relationships seems marked by the positive presence of many others: family, church family, friends, and mentors, who seemed to have remained constant through her development and helped her manage and modulate the crisis of her mother’s illness.

When Debbie talked about her God representation, she spoke of a feeling of warmth, love and acceptance, and a “trust that one is safe even through difficult times.” It can be discerned in Debbie’s statement that her present concept of God is closely tied to her actual process of relational experiences with significant others. Debbie spoke of her God representation as

very loving . . . it’s like someone who is always with me . . . always present . . . always inside of me . . . He is always inside of me and going through everything with me but at the same time . . . around me so I feel sheltered . . . if there is a time where I am pausing or praying or talking to God, it is very much a time for me where I can just leave everything behind and just rest and be completely and totally loved and accepted and whole . . . as if everything that was difficult or wrong . . . went away . . . so God is very present, very loving.

She added:

He’s in my core . . . that link . . . also being that link to who I am, but also . . . being the one who created that which I am . . . and being the One who is with and supporting and understanding of who I am . . .
When speaking about a time when she felt closest to God, Debbie said:

Sometime when I was maybe in high school . . . I really don’t remember what was happening at the time or what was going on, but I remember being alone in my room and praying to God . . . and I felt very connected in a way that was more so than how He usually was . . . to where there was no doubt whatsoever that there was a God and there was not question . . .

Debbie’s God representation was marked by a feeling of security and “being known” fully and yet loved completely. Despite the experience with her mother’s mental illness, when Debbie talked about her early years, the general feeling was that of many people holding together the project and the continued experience of being held and loved. Debbie’s internalized experience closely matches what Jones (1996) spoke of as the “emotional tone” of the self-other bond, as opposed to the other as a static thing or object.

Composite Description Two: The God Representation Is Related to Providing the Meanings That Support the Sense of Who One Is

Jones (1996) stated:

All the activities of the psyche—its actions, relationships, jobs, art and music, philosophies, and religions—are to be understood not as defenses against instincts but ways of maintaining a cohesive self through mirroring and idealizing connections with necessary self-objects. (p. 37)

For Jones, the God representation is one of the “connections” used by the self to maintain itself. Fairbairn (1952) and Kohut (1971) talked about the self as one end of the pole in an interaction. For example, in the case of a secure self, there are internalized others who provided mirroring, presence, affirmation, and a good enough psychological holding. A secure self is one pole of an affirming, positive relationship.

Buber (1970) stated it this way: “There is no I as such but only the I of the basic
word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It” (p. 54). The I, therefore, exists only in relationship to other objects. Jones (1996) added:

In object relational and self psychological theories, the dynamics of selfhood are the dynamics of interconnection. And all the self’s activities—the goals it pursues or renounces, the intimacies it establishes or flees from, the gods it worships or denies—and the patterns that echo and re-echo through those activities, all reflect the deep structure of the relational self. (p. 40)

In light of these views, it is not surprising that one of the most important relationships a person has seems to be so deeply related with who one is.

The results of the interviews with the 10 women suggest that a relationship to a God might serve to provide the meanings that support the sense of who one is. The God representation tends to support and reinforce the experience of the self as it evolves and develops. Consistent with Object Relations Theory, one constructs meanings of self-definition in relation to one’s understandings of one’s internalized object relations, here meaning that one’s God representations are responsive to oneself. Esther, who felt estranged and isolated, exemplifies how the self was apparently influenced by a God representation that is cold, distant, and uncaring. Beth, who has spent most of her life attempting to please others, appears to have a God representation that sustains her feeling of “not being good enough” in relation to a God who is perfectionistic and interested in changing her behavior. Debbie, who felt secure despite having experienced difficult times, reflects a sense of self supported by a God representation that is caring, loving, and warm. Debbie’s God is always with her in good and bad times. For all the participants, it appears that the particular God representation not only reflects one’s object relations history, but also plays a critical role in the process of internal object relations that sustain and define the coherence of self meanings.
Participant Carol seemed tentative in approaching herself and life. She struggled with trusting herself to make decisions and wished “she could be completely sure” each time she needs to make a decision. In a way, she wished to be taken care of, but at the same time, she did not trust anyone to do so, including herself.

Concerning a particular time in her life, she said:

I didn’t trust myself to know what to do . . . I didn’t trust myself to know what was the best . . . so I remember having these choices all over my room and I was asking God to just show me . . . I felt at such crossroads in my life and I really wanted Him to be in control of my life . . . I was really asking and seeking . . . I didn’t know which way to turn, so I was praying diligently . . .

In another instance she added, “I wish God would do e-mail.” When Carol talked about the God of her childhood, she stated:

My feelings are of awe . . . God . . . I just knew there was something special . . . tall, big . . . I felt a peace many times in times of turmoil, difficulties . . . God was big . . . it was comforting to me to know He was in control of everything . . . there is a God who created us and He is really in charge . . . He has a plan . . . from the beginning until the end.

She uses similar language when talking about her current God representation:

He is big, He has a plan . . . He’s there, always there . . . I feel closest to Him when I have quiet time . . . reaching for Him . . . He is comforting, He is in care of our whole future . . . I can give Him my worries about my children, their choices . . . God knows, He will take care of us . . . when I am busy, then I forget and I worry.

Carol’s insecure sense of herself seems to find coherence in a God who is all-knowing and all-powerful, who has total and complete control over her life and who takes over decision making. As Rizzuto (1979) stated, “The sense of self is in fact in dialectical interaction with a God representation that has become essential to the maintenance of the sense of being oneself” (p. 5). Jones (1996) spoke of the need to understand the “affective bond with the sacred” and how that object relation serves as the
transference of the self. Or, in other words, how the relationship with the sacred reveals the internalized relationships that form the self.

Like Carol, Heather believes in a big, awesome God. She described her God as

... so big ... and so awesome ... and so powerful ... life is nothing without God ... I really try to be obedient to Him, in regards to putting Him first in all the things in my life, and reading the word, reading about Him... He knows all things, from beginning to end ... how do you explain that ... He’s just so big ...

She believes God speaks to her directly and she expects God’s intervention in all aspects of her life. She stated she hears God speaking to her like in a human voice and that’s how she knows what to do at different times. For example, she cited the marriage to her ex-husband and how she knew it was from God. She said:

I knew John was God sent ... I really believe our marriage was a commitment with God, because I asked my pastor to ask God ... he said, this was a marriage He had planned for me ... God said this ... He has a mate for each one of us ... and so God ... I know it was ... the day of our wedding, I will never forget it, it had rained all day ... until the time of the wedding ... and it’s like the clouds opened up and Jesus was looking down at us ... it was beautiful ... it was a wedding with God ...

Heather seems unaware that the picture she just described does not fit her experience of many years in this marriage with an abusive, unfaithful husband. She continues to believe to this day that God will bring her husband back to her, even though her husband divorced her and has remarried.

Heather saw herself as not very capable. For the most part, she relied on black and white solutions, and rather than addressing her problems as best she could, she seemed to assign to God most of what she is afraid of or feels confused about. She relies on miraculous, external solutions to life’s problems. For example, concerning facing decisions related to the divorce, she stated:
When my husband wanted to divorce me and I didn't know what was happening in my life... I was praying and fasting, for answers from God... when God asked me to give it all up, to let John have it all... I didn't understand... it was a hard decision to go to the court and just show the love of Christ and knowing that God is my provider... that John wasn't... and that I was willing to let go of it all... to show even the love I have for John... unconditional love... I just knew it was something God asked me to do... and we don't understand why... I just want to be obedient to God and I did... the court system thought I was actually crazy... but it got to the point that I wasn't there for the divorce... I kept standing for my belief and did not agree with this divorce... and I said... I'm here to show that no-fault divorce is not what God wants... I'm not agreeing with this divorce at all... never signed any papers... I didn't agree to it, so in God's eyes, I'm not divorced... but the court system divorced me... and I never signed any papers... that was a hard decision to let John have all our assets... that was the hardest thing God asked me to do... to give it all up and just show His love and my stand and His stand of what marriage is supposed to be...

Heather talked about her God in such big, encompassing terms, that one cannot help but notice the paradox when she presents herself as disconnected, small, and afraid.

Participant Frances spoke of trusting herself to make good decisions. She stated, "I have learned from the past that I make good choices for myself, and even though they are scary, I don't make choices that are destructive..." Frances talked about a "partnership" with God, which seems to include her taking responsibility for her actions. This is a remarkably different relationship than Heather's. Frances said of positive turning points in her life:

I think about them as events that I had more of a hand in choosing, rather than things that happened to me... and yet, I believe that really its in a partnership with God that those things happened... they were opportunities that I took.

She described her decisions to move to a different state, to leave her marriage after many years, to return to school, and many others as turning points along the way. She spoke of the difficulty of the unknown, but at the same time the inner sense that ultimately things would work out for the best. Of difficult, sad, turning points in her life, Frances said:
I think the clearest meaning I make of all those events is that whether (quote) positive or negative in terms of effect and impact at the time, they all seem like . . . they put me on a track that I needed to be on. Most of them were not things I would have chosen if given alternatives, like the death of my dad . . . but each of them opened up a window and put me on a different path . . . that I think ultimately was a real good path, even though at the time it didn’t seem to be a path at all, it seemed to be a dead end . . .

Through different life circumstances, Frances seemed to maintain a sense of some control and choice in her life, while feeling supported and connected to a larger power. She added:

Being a religious/spiritual person means that I struggle with God and that God is very important in my life, because even in struggle that’s in relationship with God . . . that I am mindful of what connects me to God, God and nature, or God and people, and that in my work I try to see God in people . . .

Just recently, Frances learned that she has a life-threatening illness and she was once more struggling with how to reconcile “bad with God.” She said:

There are other times when I haven’t understood, and in retrospect, I understand more . . . and yet, this is a time where my life has been so much of what I wanted it to be; I have the most incredible relationship I could ever want, a job that I love, friends, and I had health; and I thought, this is such . . . I’m so grateful and now, I don’t know if I’m gonna be alive, 3 years from now, 2 years from now. I think . . . God, if that really is my path, I don’t know how to reconcile that, with God . . . that’s the piece that I’m struggling with . . .

Frances went on to describe her involvement with her treatment from choosing traditional medical treatments to natural, nontraditional ones involving Eastern medicine, meditation, and spiritual searching. When asked if she believed God provided for her needs, she answered:

I don’t think that God provides the tangible things. I think that God created a universe that is abundant and that things I need are there, but I don’t think that’s like . . . well, God didn’t provide my breakfast directly . . . because then I would say, well, what about the starving people? . . . God didn’t provide for them and they are probably fine people . . . so, I don’t think of God providing in that way . . . I think that God provides this life . . . and that God provides
an opportunity and then we really do choose what we do with that opportunity . . . so, that's how God provides . . .

Frances explained that as people we need to take more responsibility for each other and the universe. That we have a responsibility to be God’s love on this earth. This responsibility seems to be both to self and to other, and Frances seems to believe both in her own power and in collective power to provide goodness in her life and the life of others.

In summary, we seem to create the objects that populate our internal world. Jones (1996) spoke of this point this way, “We cannot say anything about God without saying something about ourselves” (p. 105). Armisted (1995) affirmed these understandings:

Part of an object-representation is a self-representation as relating to that object at that time. Likewise, object-representations are formed in accordance with the prevailing defenses and adaptations necessary to maintain a particular sense of self. Simply stated, one can never see another without seeing some aspect of oneself. (p. 16)

The words of Rizzuto (1979) are also fitting: “No child arrives at the ‘house of God’ without his pet God under his arm” (p. 8). One’s sense of self seems contingent on seeing and making meanings about aspects of one’s objects.

Composite Description Three: The God Representation Changes as Self/Other Representation Changes

Participants’ stories indicated that as self and other representations changed, their God representations also changed. The opposite also seems to be true. If self and other representations remain more the same, the God representations tend to undergo little or no change. It is interesting to note that when one’s relational experiences undergo changes, one’s God representation seems to be suspended, and then it is reformulated according to the person’s relational changes. In other words,
The God representation seems to be an internal object of continuing stability while other objects change. After its transitional use ends, then the God representation itself is changed according to other object relational shifts. This suspension of the God representation may be interpreted as a transitional function of the God representation.

This finding is related closely to Composite Description Two: The God representation is related to providing the meanings that support the sense of who one is. The sense of self is formed through internalized relational encounters and the meanings derived from them, and that sense of self is sustained through internalized representations. Naturally then, as the self experiences change, its internalized others consequently must also change. Kohut (1984), speaking of change in the self from dependency to autonomy, indicated that "the developmental moves of normal psychological life must be seen in the changing nature of the relationships between the self and its self objects" (p. 52).

Jones (1991) spoke of encountering the same discovery when he examined the relationship of transference and religion in psychotherapy clients. In his case studies, as the self experienced a different relational experience, the self underwent change, and eventually so did the God representation. Jones provided examples of four clients whose God representations changed dramatically to accompany the changes the self underwent through the process of therapy. He said of one of the clients, "Changes taking place in the transference and the transformations in her sense of self forced a reworking of her image of God" (p. 76). In the words of his client, "I couldn't think of myself as acceptable and still think of God as condemning" (p. 76). Jones added:

These reflections on judgmental and gracious representations of God suggest that people need an awareness that the ultimate nature of reality supports and legitimates their fundamental sense of themselves and undergirds their basic stance toward the world, even if it is cruel or uncaring. (p. 83)
God representation changes may be discerned from the comments of participant Frances, who first believed in a “stern, judging God.” She viewed herself tentatively and did not know experientially her capacities. At a later point, and through individual therapy, she came to understand herself more clearly, which included her sexual identity. This change in self and God representations was marked by: (a) a period of time in which the God representation was put on hold, (b) a period of entertaining the God representation again by seeing God as a universal force for good, and (c) presently considering a God representation that is personally and lovingly involved in her life.

Participant Gail also believed in a judging God, who dealt rewards and punishments. Her God needed to be pleased with a long list of many “good behaviors” to be practiced and many “bad behaviors” to be avoided at all costs. She felt an enormous pressure to behave correctly and was in constant fear of being found lacking because of misbehavior or sinful actions. She viewed herself as a person who needed to please and take care of others, until she went to college and began to experience more freedom to experiment with new ways of being. She began to question what she had learned about herself, about others, and about God. She re-established a connection with her father and discovered that he was not the “bad person I had heard about from my mother; he was accepting and loving.” She began to look at herself in a freer way and to experiment with making choices for herself. She became less hard on herself and less perfectionist. Gail, like Frances, also had a period of time when she did not relate to the God of her childhood. Eventually, she returned to a relationship with a God whom she describes now as loving, calming, supportive, accepting, and a constant safe presence. Here we see reconstructed meanings; the outcome of a transitional experience.
Participant Julie believed in a God who had very high expectations and required much sacrifice from people. This was a shaming, guilt-inducing God from whom she distanced herself. She retained a somewhat distant relationship with this God, preserving some comforting aspects of the relationship, such as comfort in prayer. Her view of self was related to doing, with a constant need to do more. No matter what, she was never content and never satisfied. One of Julie’s struggles had been in the area of relationships, in particular the struggle of preserving the self while maintaining a relationship with another. In a sense, that was Julie’s struggle with her God also. Just recently, Julie has been faced with much change in her personal life and, for the first time, has begun to see herself as perhaps capable of maintaining herself while also preserving the relationship with the other. She has begun to question the “rules she has lived by,” and it is interesting to note how in the process her God representation is also being transformed. Although she is still uncertain about how to relate to God, she is now considering the possibility of a warm, caring, guiding God with whom she may have a more close relationship.

Jones (1991), speaking of Kohut’s theory, pointed out, “Change takes place because new and more gracious interpersonal experiences are internalized as new psychological structures. And these new structures make new and more fruitful relationships possible. These changes, in turn, reverberate through a person’s relationship to the sacred” (p. 106). In sum, self-change reflects relational change, and the changed self then changes relational perspectives. This research finding supports fully this possibility, pointing out the congruence between self-transformations and God transformations.
Research Questions and Answers

Based on the above data generated results, the research questions can be answered in the following manner:

1. How does a particular God representation develop in a woman?

The data from the participants’ interviews indicate that a woman’s God representation is closely related to the dynamics encountered in relationships with significant others. It was noted in particular that the general perception by the participants regarding caring by others in their growing-up years shaped significantly the type of God representation they later formed. If a particular woman’s story was marked by positive relationships with others, her God representation also tended to have a caring, warm quality.

2. What difference does it make to a woman to hold to a particular representation of God?

As indicated by the participants’ data, a woman’s God representation seems to reinforce a women’s sense of herself and influence how she approaches the other. Therefore, the God representation is closely tied to a woman’s self-esteem and the meanings she makes of herself and others. If the God representation is rigid and or tied to negative, less functional meanings, self and other change becomes more difficult to entertain and envision. If the God representation is flexible, allowing for a sense of safety that is not tied to particularly rigid visions of self and other, then a woman may be assured of the space needed to consider herself in new and innovative ways. In a variety of ways, the God representation is related to the psychological cohesion of self meanings (Guntrip, 1969; McDargh, 1986; Rizutto, 1979).

3. When and how is one’s God representation a positive or detrimental force in the growth process?
The data from the participants in this research indicated that when the God representation is loving, understood by five participants as supportive, self and other change and growth can be entertained and embraced. The God representation provides the necessary hold (internal object constancy) so that in the safety of this sacred space one may consider that which is yet unknown. When the God representation is loving, understood by five participants as authority, controlling, and distant, it becomes more difficult for change to be entertained. The God representation provides structure, but not much freedom to imagine different possibilities.

Therapy Implications

Jones (1991) suggested that “a major shift in an image of God or ultimate reality parallels the major breakthrough in the therapeutic relationship . . .” and that in the transference, the patient’s basic patterns of relating and making sense of experience are acted out and modified. It is hoped that his change will reverberate outside the consulting room to affect the patient’s relations with friends, lovers, children, coworkers, and the sacred. (p. 84)

Therapeutic relationships have inherent potential to provide more gracious and more redeeming experiences where the self may grow beyond its present meanings and, as a consequence, transform the self and its bond with others. Such transformation may directly involve a focus on a client’s use of her God representation.

Jones (1991) spoke about the issue of guilt and how people who are abused are more prone to feeling guilty because they tend to imagine they played some role in the abuse. Thus, they tend to turn the blame and anger on themselves. He explained how theological language of guilt and forgiveness might be attractive, in particular because the way these issues are portrayed may produce more feelings of condemnation rather than forgiveness, which reinforces the bad self-representation.
Fairbairn (1952) explained it this way: “It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil” (p. 65). The importance of therapists' awareness of clients' religious and faith experiences and how they might serve to reinforce and re-enact the self-object experience cannot be overestimated. Jones spoke about the importance of the therapeutic alliance in setting up a new kind of self-object experience, one that would mirror empathy, acceptance, and contradiction of the previous understandings.

The issue of transference is one of particular interest to clinicians. The God representation may well function as an internal object that influences transference. Since the God representation is constructed by the person, its possible function may be seen in the type of transference that is displayed. Historically, therapists have looked at parents and other significant others when considering transference; now they may also consider the God representation variable and its contribution to a client’s tendency to distort the therapist. Jones (1991) discusses, in particular, the use of the transference to contradict the client’s experience of himself or herself and others. Therapists then may wish to consider the main implication of the present research as reinforcing the essential place of the therapeutic relationship and therapeutic positioning in creating the possibility of different meaning constructions about self and other.

Two of the participants in this research underwent therapy at some time in the past. Participant Ingrid entered therapy after her son was born. She stated she was abusing marijuana and alcohol and experiencing depression at the time. She credited therapy with helping her stop the drug use and “break away from the relationship with my ex-husband.” She stated that her life was “turned around” as a consequence and that “from that point on it was a lot better journey than the early years.” Since then,
Ingrid has returned to therapy a couple of times. Of the change she has experienced through therapy, she said:

Things just haven’t been the same... I don’t know how to explain that... I do the same things and yet my motivations are different... I feel different about... I just feel different about everything... I never realized I had so much capability for empathy and for love for other people... I have capabilities that I never knew before... and I see myself in a whole new way than I have ever seen myself before...

About a year ago while undergoing therapy, Ingrid stated that she had an experience with God that “I will never forget.” She explained:

My counselor had recommended that I start meditating again... so, I was attempting to do that... and one night I woke up and I was just there... I knew I was in my bed and I was... you know, safe and comfortable... but I didn’t have anything in particular on my mind... and... I heard the words “I love you”... and it was from God... not only did I hear the words... I felt such warmth... and such a feeling of love that I had never felt before... and from that point on I cannot not go to church... I have to go to church just to praise God...

Ingrid’s experience parallels one of Jones’ (1991) case studies, who through therapy came to accept herself and see herself more positively and consequently experienced God as loving her.

Participant Frances also underwent therapy. She stated that issues related to the loss of her father and later her struggles with sexual identity led her to enter therapy. She described feelings of “anger and confusion” and an uncertain “sense of self.” Through many years of therapy, Frances not only came to terms with the loss of her father but also the anger that followed the loss. She came to terms with issues related to her sexual identity and began to redefine herself as an intelligent, competent woman. Concerning her relationship with God at the beginning of her therapy, Frances stated, “I had no relationship with God... I was too angry...” She spoke of her coming out process and how if
I had had a religious life at that point, that would have created much more conflict and I probably would have had to leave that religious life, so in some ways it made it easier . . . that I wasn’t connected to a religious community at that point in time . . . I didn’t have any of this, God is gonna banish me to hell or I’m gonna be ex-communicated or whatever the language would be . . . that wasn’t even a factor.

She added:

God was not part of that process for me . . . at that time in my life I just wasn’t connected to God . . . but if I had had a personal relationship with God . . . a God who I believed was all-loving, then it could have been helpful to me . . .

Today, Frances speaks of having a relationship with God that “is the most challenging and the most rewarding of all her relationships.” She said she struggles with God, particularly since her diagnosis of cancer just recently. Frances told about God’s help to her during this time through people, nature, books, medical doctors, and her rabbi. She talked about developing a trust in God that sustains her, even through the uncertainty of life and death.

The implication of Frances’ experience for therapy is that as new meanings are developed in relationship to the self, new meanings about the God representation are formed which are now supportive of the self project. Regarding therapy’s potential for changing the image of God, Armisted (1995) says, “The careseeker gradually integrates the caregiver’s empathy into the image of God” (p. 86). For Frances, the benefits of having such a God representation as she navigates a very traumatic event in her life are immeasurable.

Implications for Future Research

The present research studied 10 women, all of whom believed in a particular God. This research provided information about the development of the God
representation in women and the use they made of their representation in the course of negotiating different aspects of self and other.

Future research similar to this may investigate women who have no belief in a God and who could speak about the God they do not believe in. Information gained from comparing God representations of belief and disbelief could yield further important understandings of women's use of the God representation and the difference it makes or does not make in their lives.

Future research could focus on the experience of different minority populations with their self and God representations. The experiences of "connection" or "disconnection" in relationships, which was shared by the participants, leave a question as to the experience of members of minority groups who consistently might feel "disconnected" from the mainstream. Unfortunately, cultural diversity was not captured in this present study. Also, the status of women differs depending on ethnicity and background; how that might influence their discourse about self and God representation is an area that could be addressed by future research.

Only one participant who described her early relational experiences as "abusive and dysfunctional" presently holds a God representation that is loving (i.e., supportive, unconditional). It is interesting to note that this one participant shared her experience in therapy and mentioned how crucial it was to helping her heal from the past and rework her sense of herself. Given the findings of this present research regarding how changes in one representation usually produce change in the others, and given that therapy is usually a process involving changes in the self and self-other meanings, future research demonstrating how the process of therapy affects the God representation might be of great interest to counseling psychologists as well as to others who offer therapy to individuals.
Final Thoughts

In summary, the results of this research indicate a clear pattern of connection between early relational experiences and the God representation, and between that God representation and the further development of self and other representations. Some representations appear to remain rigid and static, while others lend themselves to being modified and transformed. In the latter case, one of the characteristics of the God representation is that it allows one to leave it for a time without punishment or impingement. The latter also seems more supportive of self-growth aspects and the work of struggling to live out of one's true self.

In a general sense, the results of this research on the development and function of the God representation in women point to how the God representation is formed and reformed by the women's life story, and how the God representation is an integral part of solidifying the learnings the women have of self and others.

Perhaps the most important concept this research points to is the dynamic interplay of object-representations. The hope here is that through revision and reinterpretation that are at the core of its characteristics, one can move in the direction of more satisfying living. It is this researcher's hope also that the participants' open and honest sharing will make a contribution to the literature that seeks to understand the dynamics of the God representation and the function it may have in people's lives. Also, it is hoped this study will illuminate those engaged in the therapeutic process concerning the sacred ground on which they are traveling, and regarding how best to navigate the path so that the results enrich women's lives with self, other, and their God.
Appendix A

Participant Invitation/Announcement
How Does God Influence the Unfolding of a Women’s Life?

I am a doctoral student looking for participants for my dissertation research project, which focuses on women’s ideas about God and how these ideas might relate to the way their lives unfold. This study is psychological in nature and involves talking with women who are 25 years old and older. Participants only need to meet the following criteria:

1. Participants must be female and 25 years old or older.
2. Participants must be able to talk about the God they believe/do not believe in.
3. Participants must be able to talk about aspects of their lives related to developmental history and history of relationships.

Participation in this study requires only a willingness to be interviewed by me for two ninety-minute sessions and to perform some simple drawing tasks.

Yes, I am definitely interested. Here is my name and telephone number:

[Name and telephone number]

I am not sure I am interested. I need more information. You can call me to further discuss the project. Here is my name and telephone number:

[Name and telephone number]

P. S. If you do not find an interest in participating in this project at this time, simply disregard this invitation.

Herdley O. Paolini, M.S.
(612) 473-3876
Appendix B

Telephone Screening Interview
Telephone Screening Interview

1. Thank you for your interest in my research project. I really appreciate your filling out the invitation form.

2. How/where did you hear about my research?

3. What interested you about it?

4. Are you 25 years old or older?

5. How do you feel about discussing your feelings and experiences about the God you believe/not believe in?

6. Are you able to commit to meeting with me for two interviews of 90 minutes each?

7. Do you have any questions/concerns/worries about participating in this research?

If potential participant meets all the research criteria as defined by their answers to the above questions, researcher will proceed with the following questions:

8. When can we meet for the two interviews? (schedule time)

9. Can we meet in my office in Maple Plain? (if participant is unable or unwilling to meet there, researcher will ask for suggestions she might have and mutually agree on a place for interviews).

10. May I have your address so I can send you confirmation of the date, time and place of our interviews?
Appendix C

Confirmation Letter
Confirmation Letter

Dear __________,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my doctoral research project. I look forward to meeting you on _________ and __________________ at _______________.

If you have any questions at any time about the research or the interview process, please call me at (612) 479-3678.

Thank you again. I look forward to meeting you and learning more about your experiences.

Sincerely,

Herdley O. Paolini, M.S.
Appendix D
Informed Consent
Informed Consent
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology
Principal Investigator: Edward L. Trembley, D.Ed.
Research Associate: Herdley O. Paolini, M.S.

I have been invited to participate in a research project entitled “The Development and Use of the God Representation in Women.” This research is intended to explore how the God representation develops in women and the use they make of that representation in the course of their development. This project is Herdley O. Paolini’s dissertation project.

I will be asked to attend two 90-minute interviews with Herdley O. Paolini. I will be asked to meet Herdley O. Paolini for these interviews at her office or another mutually agreed place. The first interview will involve completing one demographic questionnaire which will provide general information about myself, such as my age, level of education, and employment status and sharing my memories of family, childhood and adolescence, history of significant relationships, religious history, and future aspirations. I will also be asked to draw a picture of family and of myself. The second interview will involve questions related to my feelings and thoughts about God and religion, as well as, how I deal with negative and positive feelings and making personal decisions. I will also be asked to reflect and share my feelings and thoughts about three short stories that involve person’s experiencing different life dilemmas and to draw a picture of God.

As in all research, there may be unforeseen risks to the participant. If an accidental injury occurs, appropriate emergency measures will be taken; however, no
compensation or treatment will be made available to me except as otherwise specified in this consent form. One potential risk of my participation in this project is that I may feel that a particular question is too personal. If this happens, I am free not to answer it. Another potential risk of my participation in this project is that I may be upset by the content of the interview; however, I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation without further questions. Also, Herdley O. Paolini is prepared to speak with me personally at any time about any concerns raised by this study and if necessary she is prepared to refer me to helping persons not associated with this study. I will be responsible for the cost of any therapy if I choose to pursue it.

One way in which I may benefit from participating in this study is having the chance to talk about religious, spiritual, and self-growth aspects of my life, which may be personally useful. Others may also benefit from the knowledge that is gained from this research.

All of the information collected from me is confidential. That means that my name will not appear on any papers on which this information is recorded. The forms will all be coded, and Herdley O. Paolini will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding code numbers. Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. All other forms will be retained for three years in a locked file in Dr. Edward L. Trembley’s office and a copy will be retained for three years in a locked file in Herdley O. Paolini’s office.

I may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty. If I have any questions or concerns about this study, I may contact either Dr. Edward L. Trembley, D.Ed. at (616) 387-5115 or Herdley O. Paolini at (612) 479-3876. I may also contact the chair of the Western Michigan
University's Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (616) 387-8293 or the Western Michigan University's Vice President for Research at (616) 387-8298 with any concerns that I have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the human subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Subjects should not sign this document if the corner does not have a stamped date and signature.

My signature below indicates that I have read and/or had explained to me the purpose and requirements of the study and that I agree to participate.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature                      Date

Consent obtained by:  __________________________  __________________________
Initials of researcher                   Date

I wish to receive a summary of the results of this study: Yes  No
Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire
Demographic Questionnaire

1. Full Name _____________________________________________________
2. Age __________________________________________________________
3. Current Address ________________________________________________
4. Telephone # Day _________________________ Evening ______________
5. Education _____________________________________________________
6. Occupation ___________________________________________________
7. Current Employment ____________________________________________
8. Marital Status __________________________________________________
9. Do you have any children? If so, Please state their ages: ______________
10. Race________________________________________________________
11. Ethnicity ______________________________________________________
12. Religion _______________________________________________________
13. Are you currently a member of a parish community or involved in church
related activities? _______________________________________________
14. How long have you been a member of the above community/church?

_______________________________________________________________
Appendix F
Life History
Life History

1. Place of birth/date

2. Family structure—Key memories, who closest to and why, roles played by different members, part religion had in family.

3. Childhood/Adolescence—School experiences, peer relationships, experience with teachers, priests/ministers, significant others (grandparents, etc.)

4. Religious History

5. Future Horizons: Personal and Professional

6. Picture of Family and Self—When picture complete, interviewer will ask for a verbal description of the picture and will ask questions related to the drawings: age, place, etc.
Appendix G

Focus Questions
Focus Questions

1. What stands out for you as you look at your life? (i.e., significant events, milestones, turning points, etc. Try to get a sense of the interior dialogue, which accompanied her decision making on significant issues and significant times).

2. How would you describe yourself?

3. If I went back to your high school and asked peers/teachers about you, what would they tell me about you?

4. If religious, What does it mean to you to be a religious person?

5. If religious, What does it mean to you to be a religious woman?

6. If religious, describe religious practices (i.e., lay ministry, church-based activities, attendance at worship, prayer life, etc.).

7. What are your earliest memories of religion? (i.e., religion at home, parents’ religious life and practice, church experiences, parochial school experience, religious education, etc.).

8. Trace your ideas about and images of God from as young as you can remember.

9. Tell me about God. Who or what is God to you? (i.e., gender, physical characteristics, emotional qualities, special abilities/special knowledge, limitations, God’s relationship to the world, etc).

10. Tell me about your relationship with God (i.e., role in her life, main activity in her life, belief in personal God or not and why, closeness to him or not and why, feelings when thinking about God, feelings used to get or gets from relationship with God).

11. Tell me about a time in your life when you felt closest to God? Most distant?

12. What do you like the most about God? Dislike most?
13. Do you think God expects something from you?
14. Do you think that in general you have pleased/dissatisfied God? Why?
15. Do you think that God provides/does not provide for your needs? Why?
16. What is the most important thing you expect from God? Why?
17. What do you think you have to do to fully please God?
18. How do you think God sees you?
19. According to your experiences with God, how would you describe God?
20. When you are confused, scared, fearful, sad, what do you usually do?
21. When you are peaceful, joyful, happy, what do you usually do?
22. What comforts/soothes you?
23. When faced with a difficult task, what do you usually do?
24. How does it feel to you when you are alone?
25. What re-energizes you?
26. What are the things you like to do for fun/enjoyment/relaxation?
27. Tell me about an important, but difficult decision that you have had to make in your life.
28. Tell me about a time of personal change and growth that you have experienced? What prompted it? What was helpful? What hindered it?
29. How do you imagine your life being 5-7 years from now?
30. Drawing of God. Tell me about your picture of God.
Appendix H

Short Stories
Short Stories

I am going to tell you some short stories. When I am finished with each one, I would like for you to think out loud about the story you just heard and to share any ideas and feelings that came to you as you listened and any ideas you might have about what to do if you were in the person’s situation.

1. Mary, a 50-year-old woman has been married to Richard for the past 30 years. They have three sons, two are in college and one is at home finishing the last year of high school. She has spent the last 30 years as a homemaker, raising the children and providing for their and her husband’s needs. She has only worked off and on in odd jobs as needed for different household needs. Just recently, her husband told her he has been having an affair for the past two years with a woman who is in her 30s. He has moved out of the house and wants a divorce. Mary is at a loss to understand how this could have happened and to know what to do. She has dedicated most of her life to family and has no career or job with which she can support herself.

2. Lucy has been upset about comments her sister, father, and mother-in-law make about her. In every family gathering, they seem to relate to her in a demeaning way, never listening to what she has to say, and putting down any suggestions she makes, from ideas for family vacations, to courses she wants to take, to her thoughts and feelings on what’s happening in the world and around her. They even make fun of her parenting style, which is very nurturing and attentive to her two young children. She has tried to just stay out of their conversations, but even the way they relate to her in common interactions leaves her feeling “not good enough.”
3. Elizabeth has just discovered that she is pregnant. She is married and already has three children and she was not planning on another child. In fact, her doctor advised her not to have any more children, after her last one, because of a heart condition. He has strongly advised her to have an abortion saying he cannot guarantee her life or a healthy baby if she proceeds. She is afraid something could happen and she won’t be here to raise the three children she already has.
Appendix I

Thank You Letter
Thank You Letter

Dear _______________

It was a pleasure meeting with you for our two interview sessions. I really appreciate the time you spent with me, your thoughtful responses, and your overall participation in my project. My hope is that your willingness to share of yourself and your experiences might contribute to new understandings and perhaps be of help to people as they develop and grow. I wish you the very best in the future.

Sincerely,

Herdley O. Paolini, M.S.
Appendix J

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board
Letter of Approval
Date:  19 October 1999

To:    Edward Trembley, Principal Investigator
        Herdley Paolini, Student Investigator for dissertation

From:  Sylvia Culp, Chair  

Re:    HSIRB Project Number 99-09-15

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “The Development and Use of the God Representation in Women” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination:  19 October 2000

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