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## **Living Stories: Modern Storytelling as a Call for Connection**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents an intuitive inquiry into storytelling using creative arts and media within the context of modern culture. Taken from a relational and transpersonal perspective, the Living Stories style of personal storytelling is explored and developed in response to the need for connection expressed in the culture-at-large and to create opportunities for transformation. The research questions, What makes storytelling elicit compassionate connection? The researcher engages in a creative and collaborative storytelling process with 1 storyteller who shares her breast cancer experience over the course of several years. The resulting story is presented to 95 participants via an interactive mixed media gallery exhibition featuring photography, poetry, and music, and stations where feedback is invited. Data includes questionnaire and creative expression responses from participants and researcher observation. Key findings include (a) participant reports of participatory knowing and transpersonal phenomena, including the experience of interconnection; (b) emotional narrative as an essential storytelling feature; (c) photography as a visual anchor; and (d) the story as inseparable from the act of storytelling. Study findings expand the storytelling definition to include modern forms whereby the storyteller is not present and suggest applications in television, film, digital storytelling, and community.

During graduate school, I sensed the cultural need to share our meaningful, true stories to create connections and trans-

form our relationships with each other. From the perspective of intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2004), my sense of storytelling as a call for connection was the initial claim of the research topic.

As storytelling and intuition reflect similar processes, the method is well-suited for the study reported in this article. Similarities include: (a) bringing compassion to the process, (b) utilizing intuition and creativity, (c) valuing the unique voice of the individual, and (d) catalyzing social action. Although most at home in creative and intuitive mode, I find that the amorphous nature of these processes does not lend itself easily to order and rigor. Specifically, intuitive inquiry added a framework to the process and offered a rigorous way to capitalize on my intuitive knowing. Study findings were the result of a long process of dwelling upon the data, allowing information to integrate within me, and noticing insights as they emerged over time.

This study explores modern storytelling using modern media by utilizing a gallery exhibition to tell the story of a woman who confronts breast cancer and her will to live. While styles of storytelling vary greatly, the storytelling style in this study: (a) honors rather than exploits the teller; (b) honors rather than sensationalizes the story; (c) tells the story with, rather than without, the teller's permission; (d) utilizes heartfelt motivation to share the story rather than bragging, revenge, or other non-heart-based motivation; (e) is guided by an internal sense of truth rather than by external fact checking; (f) is conducted in a safe and trusting environment rather than an unprotected and vulnerable one; (g) relies on the storyteller rather than other sources to provide the story; and (h) invites the audience to interact with the story and co-own the experience rather than view the story distantly as voyeurs.

During the years prior to completing this study, I developed a storytelling process called Living Stories as a remedy to the cultural call for connection and which I facilitate professionally as a storiographer. The storiographer is

the facilitator of the storytelling process and also the researcher in this study. Living Stories is a collaborative and creative way of engaging in meaningful personal storytelling that expresses the teller's story from a place of authenticity, creates connections through sharing the story with others, and thereby creates opportunities for transformation. While storytelling traditionally involves a storyteller reciting tales to a live audience, Living Stories entails a story told via modern media, such as interactive exhibitions, television, film, and the internet, without the actual presence of the teller. Storytelling itself occurs when the storyteller relays the story to the storiographer during storytime; a ritualized process of tuning into and following the unfolding story organically, intuitively, and creatively; and during subsequent presentations of the story to a larger audience without the storyteller present.

The study utilized Living Stories as the framework through which to explore storytelling and served to further develop this storytelling style for practical application as my vocation. Due to the dual study purpose, a lengthy 5-year research process ensued. The Cycle 1 text was a pilot study that consisted of storytelling meetings with a woman who shared her breast cancer experience with me, followed by a public exhibit of her story featuring creative materials that resulted from our meetings. Text included written, drawn, and videotaped responses from exhibit visitors. Pilot Study 1 was a personal exploration which was later incorporated into the hermeneutic circle of investigation. The forward arc of the hermeneutic circle, usually Cycles 1 and 2, entails researcher articulation of topic understanding prior to engaging the claim of others in the return arc. Due to the relational nature of the topic of storytelling, the study also engaged the claim of others informally in Cycles 1 and 2. The Cycle 2 text was a second pilot study that consisted of continued storytelling meetings with the woman who participated in Pilot Study 1, accompanied by records that tracked our storytelling process. Pilot Studies 1 and 2 informed the

study design, carried out during Cycle 3. Cycle 3 text consisted of collecting original empirical data via an interactive gallery exhibition of the teller's story, featuring materials prepared for the exhibit plus materials that had resulted from both pilot studies. Data included questionnaire and creative expression responses from exhibit participants, and researcher observations. Cycle 4 included the final set of interpretive lenses. Cycle 5 entailed a discussion of study findings and how they related to relevant literature.

Although initially narrower in scope, the study ultimately addressed five main questions: (a) What comprises the art of storytelling? (b) What is the essence of storytelling? (c) What makes storytelling elicit compassionate connection? (d) What encompasses storytelling experience? and (e) What engages audiences in the storytelling experience?

#### Relevant Literature

The historical view of stories as cultural artifacts has led to a focus on content over process. The prevalent constructivist view posits that our narratives serve to make meaning of ourselves and our world (Bruner, 1987; Cohler, 1991; Sarbin, 1986). Therefore, the story literature has neglected dynamic exploration of the act of storytelling. This inquiry focused on expanding and enhancing the exploration of storytelling to include a relational and transpersonal perspective.

Storytelling is related to personal growth and development, as well as individual and cultural transformation. In particular, Stone Center research resulted in a relationship-authenticity model of human development promoting empowerment through connection, counter to the separation-individuation model (Jordan, Kaplan, Baker Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991). Personal storytelling is a natural means of relationship formation; Living Stories emphasizes authenticity and connection through collaboration.

In alignment with Whitehead (1929/1960) and Ferrer's (2002) participatory theories of individual, communal, and

global change, this study extends the relational perspective beyond interpersonal relationship to participation in transpersonal phenomena occurring in collective consciousness. Ferrer defined participatory knowing as a multidimensional access to reality that includes not only the intellectual knowing of the mind, but also the emotional and empathic knowing of the heart, the sensual and somatic knowing of the body, the visionary and intuitive knowing of the soul, as well as any other way of knowing available to human beings. (p. 121)

#### Cycle 1: Pilot Study 1, Initial Lenses, and Refining the Research Topic

Pilot Study 1 served as the text of Cycle 1. The pilot study consisted of storytelling meetings with 1 storyteller over the course of several months followed by a public mixed media exhibition of the resulting story to 100 attendees. The exhibit featured black and white photographs I took of the storyteller; her poetry, paintings, and collage; a pre-mastectomy breast casting of the teller; music she listened to during chemotherapy; and hats she wore after losing her hair. Attendees were given an opportunity to leave written, drawn, and videotaped feedback during the exhibit.

Because I did not anticipate conducting a second pilot study for Cycle 2, interpretive lenses were created at the end of Cycles 1 and 2. Therefore, I spent time immersed in the story experience, story materials, and feedback of the storyteller, exhibit attendees, and myself. To extract my understanding, I asked myself, *What do I know now?* In the manner of brainstorming, I wrote down whatever phrases automatically came to mind about the storytelling process without dwelling on or thinking about them. I put these in a list format, then narrowed it to those views that most immediately and strongly claimed my attention. I identified nine interconnected lenses to characterize my initial understanding of the storytelling process used in Pilot Study 1: 1) connecting beyond the self, 2) the dynamic nature of stories, 3)










story ripeness as the desire to share a meaningful story with others from an inner place of authenticity, 4) storytelling as sacred process, 5) storytime as a ritual to engage the storyteller, storiographer, and audience, 6) storytelling as an act and art form that occurs in the context of relationship, 7) power of black and white photography to convey the story, 8) intuition as a story pathway, and 9) story expression in creative form. At the end of Cycle 1, my research questions was, *What makes stories sacred?* To address ongoing shifts in topic clarity, I subsequently revised the question to, *What makes storytelling elicit compassionate connection?*

### Cycle 2: Pilot Study 2 And Second Set Of Lenses

The second pilot study entailed the continuation of the storytelling process and served as Cycle 2 of intuitive inquiry. During the initial pilot study, trust and a close collaborative relationship had developed between the storyteller and me. Although cancer-free, her journey through breast cancer recovery continued 1½ years after the exhibition. The storyteller agreed to culminate our continued collaboration with another story exhibition, described in Cycle 3 of this report. The storyteller and I first tracked our storytelling process using three methods: (a) tape-recording meetings; (b) journaling thoughts, processes, and insights; and (c) notating specific storytelling experiences using a Process Grid, developed by Anderson (2000). The Process Grid proved frustrating and difficult to each of us, due to the requirement to use linear thinking to describe intuitive processes. Alternately, we set an intention to maintain a witnessing awareness of the story and storytelling process as we worked together, tracking the emerging connections and insights in our journals.

In order to generate lenses anew, I made a fresh list of phrases that expressed my topic view. As in Cycle 1, I narrowed the list to items that claimed my attention most strongly and immediately, adding my accompanying thoughts. Again, I experienced each lens merging into the

other, seeming more like a whole than individual elements. I experienced a breakthrough moment when my perspective clarified into an image, shown next to lens 2. The following lenses aligned with aspects of the image:

1.  *Personal storytelling as spiritual longing. The basic human thirst for connection is a spiritual longing.*
2.  *Sacredness permeates the storytelling process and invites openness to mystery.*
3.  *An internal sense of truth defines story authenticity rather than external facts.*
4.  *Love transforms us. The core of storytelling is love, symbolically represented in the center of the image.*
5.  *Collaborative relationship as a catalyst for love. The storiographer and storyteller form a relationship stemming from compassion and trust for each other and the story, which the story audience later joins and may experience as loving.*
6.  *Storytelling is a transpersonal journey, attuning us to our spiritual essence and realization of our transpersonal nature.*
7.  *Participatory knowing flows through one from sources beyond and interconnected with oneself.*
8.  *Our stories are art, and art is powerful. Art is the yin or outer expression of the yin or internal sense of truth of our stories.*
9.  *Our stories are living. The dynamic nature of our stories extend beyond the teller, audience, place, and time to connect with other people, places, and times.*

### Cycle 3: Data Collection and Review of Data

Cycle 3 involved collecting data via an interactive mixed media exhibition of the teller's story presented to 95 research participants. Both pilot studies informed the study design and yielded story materials utilized in the exhibit. Story materials included (a) written narrative, (b) paintings, (c) a pre-mastectomy breast casting, (d) poetry, (e) photographs taken at various stages of the cancer process, (f) music, (g) hats, (h) a collage, and (i) a voice recording.

The exhibit was held during a single weekend in a San Francisco gallery with heavy foot traffic. Exhibit entry was granted to those who agreed to become research participants, including the general public and those invited by the storyteller or researcher; one-third were male. Participant recruitment was accomplished through event promotion in print media and via e-mail; the exhibit topic of breast cancer was omitted to prevent participant bias.

The exhibit venue met goals the storyteller and I agreed would create a good context for sharing her story: (a) windows and natural light, (b) nature visible, (c) an artistic yet homey feel, and (d) a public setting. The storyteller chose to have minimal input into the exhibit planning and design. Using my background in human environmental design, I designed the exhibit to evoke the sacredness of the teller's story and maximize the likelihood of sympathetic resonance in participants. Some of the design elements used to elicit resonance were (a) the choice of an aesthetically pleasing space, (b) a spacious layout of materials within the gallery, (c) creative expression stations integrated into the exhibit allowing for a sense of privacy yet inclusion, (d) near museum-quality presentation of materials, and (e) opportunities to physically interact with story materials.

Exhibit participants were invited to take a quiet moment before entering the exhibit space. This simple ritual was intended to introduce participants to the exhibit space and set the tone for entering into storytime, a sacred realm

where they were free to become immersed in the offerings. A voice recording of the teller and music she listened to during chemotherapy were available to participants via headphones. Signs invited participants to try on hats the storyteller had worn after losing her hair and leave responses at creative expression stations. Stations included a table with supplies for drawing or writing, a video camera for taping responses (which no one opted to do), and a lounge chair with a music station and drawing supplies.

Data consisted of written and drawn creative expression responses left at the stations in the exhibit space and an open-ended questionnaire completed by participants immediately following exhibit attendance. Data analysis included questionnaire data review, my aesthetic response to creative expressions analyzed as individual and collective audience feedback, and my observations during the timeframe of planning and holding the exhibition.

### Data Analysis

Participant data consisted of 79 completed questionnaires and 44 creative expressions. First, I read the questionnaires in chronological order; jotting down thoughts, observations, and recollections as I went along. My first questionnaire readthrough was intended to acquaint me with the material—a way of letting myself begin to absorb it slowly without the added burden of trying to make sense of it. Then, I purposely released focus on the materials for the next several weeks to commence an incubation period.

I read the questionnaires in reverse order during the second review, hoping to notice trends by taking in the data from a perspective varying from my first reading. I set an intention to allow data synthesis and findings to form naturally and effortlessly. I sought to be surprised. Findings and interpretation of findings became an enmeshed process. I took notes in my journal about each questionnaire, copying sentences resonating within me and noting similar responses that eventually (as the number of reviewed questionnaires

mounted) revealed themes. As pages in my journal filled, I experienced periodic spurts of insight about the topic. New thoughts and ideas came into consciousness in what seemed like a creative and synthesizing process of participatory knowing.

About halfway through the second questionnaire review, I sensed that being interviewed would help draw out the analysis of data emerging from within me. A colleague who was familiar with my research interviewed me in a location in nature. The relational nature of interviewing paralleled the storytelling process of drawing out the story itself, so it seemed like a natural fit. While some of the interview yielded repetitive information, new elements of understanding also appeared.

To synthesize the data, I outlined findings by theme, often quoting from participants. Rather than asking myself, "What do I know now?" as I had in successive cycles of lens development, I asked myself, "What are the data saying?" Rather than focusing on specific phrases or responses, I felt immersed in the whole of the data as a collective resource. As I registered insights, I found that specific findings often melded into each another, as though intertwined. Synthesizing the data and preparing Cycle 4 lenses became progressively more confusing. I intuitively took daily walks in nature to catalyze this process, carrying a tape recorder to capture insights and breakthroughs as they occurred. The process of reaching deeper understanding continued outside of the walks in nature, as they effected a breaking loose of consciousness that spurred the process.

Creative expression data were treated both individually and as a collective audience expression. I used my aesthetic response to access resonance and other aspects of participatory knowing. According to art-based researcher McNiff (1998), "The basic test of aesthetic significance is whether or not the expression of another appeals to the person perceiving it. This is a completely different measure of efficacy than the conventional scientific criterion" (p. 172). Braud

(1998) noted, "Aesthetic feelings may serve as useful indicators of the validity of methods, findings, and conclusions, as well as any conceptual models or theories developed from the work" (p. 220). When I experienced a strong aesthetic response, my immediate internal sense was an affirmation that the particular creative expression captured a deep truth about the story and teller and thus was appealing—as opposed to my personal aesthetic of finding a poem or drawing pleasing in its own right. This sense of connection to or alignment with truths of the story, storyteller, and participant expressions possibly pointed to participatory knowing. My aesthetic response included surges of emotion, such as the welling of tears, the sensation of tingling throughout my body, and the experience of sympathetic resonance (Anderson, 1998, 2000, 2004). Sympathetic resonance registers in my body as a vibrating sensation in my heart chakra. According to numerous Eastern traditions, the heart chakra is one of several energy centers in that body and is located in the heart region. I have not compared notes with other researchers who utilize sympathetic resonance to discover how they experience it. As the reader, you may experience sympathetic resonance as you read this and other intuitive inquiry-based research articles, which would serve as a measure of resonance validity (Anderson, 2004).

I experienced a simplicity and clarity in the overall creative expression data in comparison to the complexity and variation of the questionnaire responses. The cohesive mood of the creative expression data as a whole seemed to define a particular aspect of the storytelling experience. The aspect was elusive until I experienced a breakthrough in the questionnaire data which led to the finding of emotional narrative as an essential feature of storytelling. The breakthrough came after a period of indwelling and incubation during which I simultaneously held the strong, ineffable moodiness of the collective creative expression data alongside the varied thematic expressions of the questionnaire data. The contrasting qualitative feelings eventually shifted

from ineffability to a cognitive flash of insight which lent new understanding to my visceral experience. Following, came the realization that the creative expression data was a collective response to the emotional narrative of the story.

#### Cycle 4: Interpretive Lenses as Meta-Lenses

The meta-lenses serve as Cycle 4 lenses and address the findings in three main categories: art, essence, and experience, as displayed in Table 1. The meta-lenses incorporate more developed concepts from Cycles 1 and 2, as well as new concepts. Findings are presented primarily at the meta-level in this article due to length constraints. Accompanied by illustrative participant responses, the 3 meta-lenses of the storytelling process are:

1. *The art of storytelling is comprised of six elements: (a) Motivation and a stance of love and compassion, (b) creative collaboration between storyteller, storytographer, and audience, (c) the story itself, (d) story materials, (e) presentation of the story, and (f) experience of the storytelling.*

A notable aspect of the first meta-lens is the indivisibility of the story itself from the art of storytelling—entwinement of content and process.

*Photography as the visual anchor.* Exhibit participants indicated that a powerful visual anchor—a visual depiction of the teller and story in an aesthetically strong manner—was vital to the storytelling. One exhibit participant commented, "Her art helped me connect to the story, but her face throughout helped connect it to a person, a living woman." The photographs were continually referred to as powerful and associated with conveying the emotional nar-

**Table 1.** Major Findings Organized as the Art, Essence, and Experience of Storytelling

Meta-Lens What comprises the art of storytel- ling	1: Meta-Lens What is the es- sence of storytel- ling	2: Meta-Lens What encompasses storytelling experi- ence	3: Meta-Lens What encompasses storytelling experi- ence
A. Motivation and stance of love and compassion	A. Emotional nar- rative	A. Audience en- gagement	
B. Creative col- laboration	B. Interior and ex- terior landscape	B. Participant in- sights and change	
C. Story	C. Congruence	C. Participatory transpersonal ex- perience/knowing	
D. Story Materials	D. Authenticity		
E. Presentation of story	E. Love and com- passion		
F. Experience of storytelling	F. Creative col- laboration		

rative, particularly the vulnerability and anguish of experi-  
encing and exposing a body ravaged by cancer and chemo-  
therapy. A participant reflected, "The photos—all of them—  
were incredibly moving. Powerful, forceful, clear. . . . Only  
after I saw the nude photos of the mastectomy did I remem-  
ber that my mother had breast cancer and a mastectomy (30  
years ago)."

2. *The essence of storytelling is comprised of six elements: (a) Emotional narrative, (b) interior and*

*exterior landscape, (c) congruence, (d) authenticity, (e) love and compassion, and (f) creative collaboration.*

Each of these elements is important to most of the storytelling components defined in Meta-lens 1, thereby distinguishing them as a separate meta-lens.

*Emotional narrative.* Perhaps the strongest finding—and a new lens—was the discovery of an emotional narrative, as opposed to a factual narrative. The emotional narrative delivered the emotional tone and depth of the story and storyteller to the exhibit participants whereas the factual narrative delivered dates, times, and other details about the story events. As 1 participant remarked, “It was a deeply personal telling.” The exhibit included a lot of emotional narrative and comparatively little factual narrative. Although a number of participants expressed the desire for more factual information, the emotional depth conveyed through the storytelling was considered vital by many participants. A participant explained, “Now I feel that I know deeply her emotional and somewhat physical struggle, which is interesting because I don’t know much at all about the specifics—I have depth, but not breadth—it’s the former that really matters.”

*Interior and exterior landscape.* As I have defined it, the interior landscape revealed the teller’s inner psychospiritual struggle and decision to live. It was the description of her internal life, including emotions, thoughts, and attitudes; whereas the exterior landscape was the detail of the teller’s outer life, such as physical appearance and surroundings (which also conveyed emotional narrative).

*Congruence.* Exhibit participants showed a strong sensitivity to congruence between elements of the storytelling experience, including the exhibit environment and story materials. For instance, exhibit participants commented that the environment provided a nurturing holding ground for the story. When aspects of the physical environment did not match the emotionally vulnerable tone of the story exhibit-

ted, exhibit participants acted to correct the incongruence. One notable example occurred continuously during the exhibit opening night: participants closed the door to the exhibit space to block out the noise from the exhibit reception in the neighboring room. I interpreted these acts as intended, in part, to rectify the incongruence between the deeply personal exhibit story and the laughter and party chatter of the opening reception.

*Authenticity.* Exhibit participants overwhelmingly viewed the story and storyteller as authentic. The storyteller’s authentic expression of herself and her story—from the heart, open, revealing, vulnerable—through the story materials was met by exhibit participants with resonance or a sense of connection. One participant expressed, “I resonated, felt, invited, knew I heard/saw a universal truth communicated through [the storyteller’s] story.” Another offered, “I felt sadness, empathy and a connectedness to [the storyteller] because I had a similar experience. . . . All of the emotions were certainly authentic.”

*Love and compassion.* The pervasiveness of exhibit participant responses about the presence of love and compassion throughout the storytelling process identified this finding as an essential storytelling feature.

*Creative collaboration.* The collaborative relationship between storiographer and storyteller was evident to exhibit participants, who often commented on what the relationship conveyed to them and how it impacted their experience.

3. *Storytelling experience is encompassed by (a) audience engagement, (b) participant insights and change, and (c) participatory transpersonal experience/knowing.*

Participants indicated the storytelling created a wide array of connections for them. Exhibit participants experienced personal insights and change, and participatory and spiritual knowing.

*Audience engagement.* The finding of audience engagement gradually emerged over the course of data analy-



sis, through a combination of observational data and exhibit participant data. Exhibit participants appeared to become immersed in the storytelling through a series of stages of increasing connection: (a) *commitment*, (b) *attention*, (c) *participation*, and (d) *ownership*. I believe that a fifth stage, *interbeing* or a sense of unity on some level, may occur in succession to ownership, as reported by a few participants.

As exhibit participants committed to attending the exhibit—by signing a consent form and then walking through the gallery entrance—they focused their attention on the exhibition. Most gave the exhibit their full attention, then experienced the resulting pull of the emotional narrative. The emotional narrative and participant movement through the exhibit at a slow and relaxed pace increased story immersion. Interacting with story elements and the exhibit environment transitioned the audience from observers to participants in the storytelling process.

*Participant insights and change.* Most participants reported personal insights from their storytelling experiences. Often, the insights revealed a changed perspective, a stepping back and viewing oneself from within a larger context than in normal, everyday life:

The story brought me back to an awareness of how and who I want to be in the world and what really matters.

This made me focus on what's really important in life, i.e. loving someone and feeling the same from the other and not waiting for tomorrow to [sic] things that are important.

A number of male participants lacked a sense of connection with the storyteller but gained "the insight of what women have to go thru [sic]." The following comment reflects what a number of men conveyed: "I could truly empathize with [the storyteller's] pain. But to be honest it was hard for me to feel a connectedness with her."

*Participatory transpersonal experience/knowing.* Reflections by a number of exhibit participants revealed experiences, insights, or knowing of a participatory or spiritual nature. For instance:

Those hats transported me into humanity vs. detached observer. . . . I felt connected to [the storyteller], the physical [storyteller], but only briefly. She became real, but then she became an icon for cosmic/divine injustice. In other words, she lost her individual identity and became an image through which I received other revelations.

We all seem to be connected to the same source.

We all may live in different bodys [sic] but in the end we are all the same – I am the same as [the storyteller].

I was hit hard by the idea . . . that the body and mind and all things are connected.

Some exhibit participants expressed intuition or possible participatory knowing about the future. For example:

I find myself not wanting to write this but I had the feeling that my partner would get breast cancer.

I felt it put me into the future, knowing that everything is going to be o.k.

Several expressed experiences with loved ones who had died of cancer. Some of the language exhibit participants used to describe such occurrences was remarkable in its concreteness:

My friend . . . who died from breast cancer, was there in the room too.

My mother died in my living room of brain cancer after 2 yrs of struggle. . . . It transports me to my mother's side.

### Cycle 5: Integration of Final Lenses with Relevant Literature

Study findings reveal storytelling as a dynamic art form inseparable from the story itself, as Georges (1969) suggested. Storytelling includes qualities that narrative alone, as a simple depiction of events, does not. Story or narrative, as it is considered in story research, must therefore be expanded from its definition as a description of events to inclusion within the context of the act of storytelling. Dewey (1916) explained this concept, "There is no distinction of subject matter and method. . . . When a man is eating, he is eating food. He does not divide his act into eating and food."

Human participation in transpersonal and spiritual phenomena is a creative, multidimensional event that can involve every aspect of human nature, from somatic transfiguration to the awakening of the heart, from erotic communion to visionary cocreation, and from contemplative knowing to moral insight. (p. 12)

Findings from this study allow for a shift in the constructivist paradigm to what could be called *participatory constructivism*. That is, we are not merely making sense of our own lives through narrative interpretation but are also accessing and cocreating transpersonal phenomena and achieving transpersonal understanding or participatory knowing. Relational theory, studied at the Stone Center (e.g., Surrey, 1991), which posits that connection through mutual relationship is critical to psychological growth, could be expanded to include a transpersonal perspective. While research shows that mutual empathy and mutual engagement are important elements of mutual relationship, this study found that exhibit participants experienced a high degree of

empathy and engagement with the story and teller—even though not through mutual relationship/presence. Perhaps storytelling that elicits connection in various ways fosters psychological and spiritual growth in the individual and collective humanity. Future research could address these concepts.

### Contributions and Challenges of Intuitive Inquiry

Intuitive inquiry invited and offered me freedom to live in the mystery of intuitive processes and watch for, rather than deduce, meaning—within the rigorous framework of this research process. I found data analysis and the emergence of findings to be fun and surprising experiences. Previously, I had been skeptical about how much new information could come through my personal filter or interpretive lenses. However, many concepts and phrases completely new to my topic understanding emerged from the data. Emotional narrative, congruence, and interior and exterior landscape, for instance, were unknown to my thought process about storytelling before collecting and analyzing original empirical data. I came to understand that the intuitive inquiry researcher capitalizes on the blending of a unique, in-depth immersion in and understanding of the topic—in a manner similar to heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990)—with the ability to see the data with a beginner's mind. An expanded understanding of the topic emerges from an integration of in-depth immersion with maintaining a beginner's mind.

One of the most difficult aspects of intuitive inquiry I encountered was lens development. Throughout the research process, I struggled to understand what lenses were and how to access, organize, and present them. I found it helpful to identify my evolving perspective by asking myself, "What do I know now?" at the end of Cycles 1 and 2 and "What are the data telling me?" at the end of Cycle 3. I had ongoing and unresolved difficulty in calling out individual lenses because I experienced my perspective as an intertwined and indivisible whole. Various aspects of my perspective

blended into each other as I tried to separate them throughout each cycle. The way I could best express my perspective was often through an image or poem—evoking an essence inclusive of more than a sum of parts.

I still do not know how to bridge this collision of intellectual and creative worlds. In utilizing a creative and intuitive-based research method that capitalized on my natural proclivities, it felt counter-intuitive, constrictive, and even painful to funnel this process through my rational, left brain in order to express my understanding in written form; like trying to squeeze into a shoe two sizes too small. I think intuitive inquiry positively challenges the intuitive inquiry researcher and the research community to use creative modes of expression of understanding such as current technology allows through, sound, digital video, and computer animation and graphics.

One of the greatest contributions intuitive inquiry made to the study was to increase the domain of practical application of findings through requiring an expansive approach to topic exploration. Whereas I was able to refine Living Stories in an exhibition format in process of my dissertation, my vocational focus shifted substantially. Findings yielded key principles and concepts I saw as applicable to storytelling in a broader context. For instance, I concluded that the findings of congruence and emotional narrative could be effectively applied to media formats such as television and film. This has led me to film a documentary as a direct application of the storytelling process developed through the study. Applying study findings to a collaborative filmmaking process is a continually rewarding experience, allowing me to bridge academic research with the lived world. In this expansion I am able to contribute to the goal of social action shared by Living Stories and intuitive inquiry and also indulge my preference to reside primarily in my right brain. From where this researcher stands, navigating the waters of intuitive inquiry has been well worth the journey.

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#### Author's Note

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## The Union of Flesh and Spirit in Women Mystics

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**ABSTRACT:** This study<sup>1</sup> explores the experience of the body for contemporary female mystics. It is an exploration in how women mystics of today—those who have devoted most of their lifetime to prayer, meditation, and spiritual service—make sense of the body. What is the relationship between spirit and body, God and flesh, for such women? Is it a relationship of tension or even opposition, and how does it evolve over time? These are some of the questions that guided my investigation. The impulse to understand how the body is experienced and understood by such women was felt by me as both a longing to challenge, deepen, and refine my awareness and understanding of spirit and the body, specifically for women mystics. I also felt this as a burning in the heart, an urgent desire to connect and bridge the larger world of matter and that of spirit, to inquire into that dimension where flesh and spirit are not two, but one. I believe that this impulse to understand the relationship between body and spirit is both personal and quite possibly collective. My hope is that this research will serve as one step to further our collective understanding of human embodiment.

My vehicle for this exploration was a qualitative research method developed by Rosemarie Anderson (1998,

<sup>1</sup> This report is based upon dissertation research (Esbjörn, 2003) supervised by Rosemarie Anderson, Paul Roy, and Kaisa Puhakka.