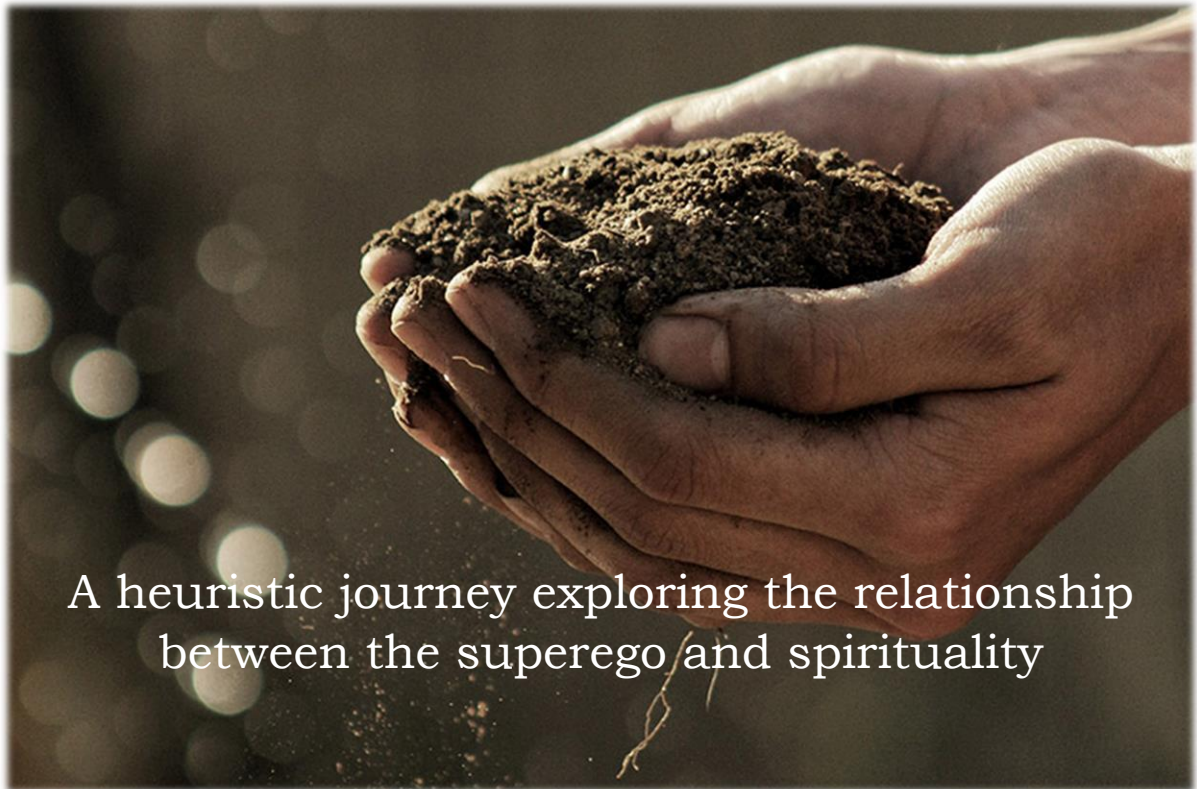


TRANSCENDING the SUPerego



A heuristic journey exploring the relationship
between the superego and spirituality

Photo by Gabriel Jimenez on Unsplash (2017)

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Abstract

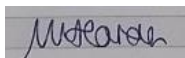
A cruel superego can be destructive to the way we feel about ourselves, to the way we perceive and relate to others and to how we interact with the world. Spirituality can provide a sense of reprieve from these severe elements of ourselves through interconnection with others, with the world, with mystery and the divine. How these two components of our existence – our harsh internal realities and spirituality – interact and influence one another, the trauma that contributes to their formation and development, and how we transcend the limitations of our attacking internal world to experience something different, is what was explored in this research.

Having been haunted by a harsh superego throughout my life, while simultaneously and contrastingly having a dynamic relationship with spirituality, brought me to the exploration of these two components within myself. This paper phenomenologically explores how I experience the relationship between the superego and spirituality.

Embarking on a heuristic journey of self-discovery was an invigorating and perilous quest, taking me to barren and desolate spaces as well as rich, embodied and lively contemplations in my search for meaning. The dance between the superego's harsh, demanding and perfectionistic pressures contrasting with spiritualities' gentler, spacious and poetic phenomena revealed experiences of the transcendent and immanent, of the embodied feminine, of the ordinary, of the mystical, of rhythm, of my okay-ness. Please join me in this discovery of awakening to love.

AtteStation of AuthorSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by any other person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor any material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or any other institution of higher learning.



Merilyn Carden

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Supervisor: Wiremu Woodard

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WelcOMe

I was born in the mid-1970s, the third child after two brothers. My family, being Pakeha, middle class and situated in a comfortable and well-equipped community, were perceived as model citizens in the climate of the time. At a few months old I was baptised by the family Protestant minister in what sounds to have been an intimate ceremony in my own home. Being part of the local Presbyterian church was as normal to me as going to school; it was what was done, and I knew no different. My life played out in what I perceived to be a somewhat ordinary fashion.

While my environment, community and family had high, almost perfectionistic standards, I was living with an internal confusion that left me feeling isolated from this world, with a deep sense of loneliness and a despairing impression that even God him/herself had abandoned me in my most vulnerable of moments. The haunting of the unlanguage and unthought, but body-lived feeling of early realities, known only it seemed to myself, felt conflicted, and contrasted with the privilege that I knew I had in my life.

My world was rather predictable of the era, for Pakeha East-Auckland girls; I was a diligent student, I participated in the things I was meant to, I attended church with my family and grew up with a knowledge of a Judeo/Christian God, and in those early years I refrained from questioning anything. The dualistic split between right and wrong felt absolute and irrefutable and the consequences of getting it wrong when I worked so hard to do everything right, was devastating to my internal world, conditioning me for a perfectionistic drive in a defensive attempt to override my undeveloped tolerance for the complexity of life.

I had the plan for my life all worked out and it followed through quite succinctly. At fourteen I 'became a Christian' in a very real way at an Easter camp on Motutapu island. My world profoundly altered after this numinous experience, and my life became consumed with matters of spirituality, service to the church and contribution to humanity through the worldview of Christianity. I finally seemed to find a place to belong, my life had meaning, with a God that would never leave nor forsake me, and this was balm to my abandoned soul.

By the time I became a nurse, aged twenty, there was a growing sense of discomfort, doubt and unease about not just whether I suited my new profession, but whether my life was unfolding not as I wanted it to, but more how it was expected to. Volunteering at an orphanage in Romania was transformational for me, but not enough to snap me out of my life trajectory, and I returned home to get married. I was married for twelve years and during that time I increasingly wrestled with, and agonised over, my own experience of depression along with experiencing the soul-destroying disappointment that this life that had been mapped out for me was not what I wanted. From this desperate and deadly space, I unexpectedly stumbled upon love and life.

The ensuing fallout left me feeling a deep sense of rejection from the community where I thought I belonged. A place that for so long had been a source of protection, comfort and stability, was teaching me a lifelong lesson in the power of the shadow. This experience forced me deeper into myself, into further isolation, and the perceived friendlessness that I had known for a long time felt even more profound. Any expression of my spirituality or life-story that was already hidden took me increasingly into reclusion for fear of more shame and rejection.

Seven years later, and the superego's expression through my internally isolated and retreating parts, along with the external judging and rejecting forces of others, were alive and well, and my yearning for God, or whatever I was now going to call it, was beckoning me back to exploration. It was from this space that my interest in exploring these two components – superego and spirituality – emerged and formed the basis for this heuristic inquiry.

THE FRAMEWORK

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.

We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

(often attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but this is disputed,
true author unknown)

The 'ego', by 1707, in metaphysics, was defined as "the self; that which feels, acts, or thinks," from the Latin *ego*, meaning "I". 'Super' derives from Latin, meaning "above, over, beyond" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2018). The psychoanalytic sense of the word 'superego' was coined by Freud in 1894. The superego is defined as "that part of the psyche which controls the impulses of the id", as a translation of German *über-Ich* (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2018).

The 'superego' was described by Freud (1923) as a part of the ego that sits in judgement above the rest, partly conscious and partly unconscious, and including two components: the conscience and the ego ideal. This view believes the superego develops out of the ego, beginning in early latency, from introjection of the harsh characteristics of early object relational figures and other authority figures present in the child's life and reflective of the current societal demands (Ewen, 2010). In contrast, Reiner (2009) cites Klein as describing the superego developing much earlier in early infancy, as a result of the projection and re-introjection of the infant's early aggressive phantasies.

To define spirituality feels as difficult as to define the colour of air or wind. In fact, the etymological explanation of the root of the word 'spirit' in 'spirituality' is that it is from the

Latin word *spiritus* which translates as 'breathing, respiration and of the wind' (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2018). David Tacey (2016) attempts to define spirituality while acknowledging it is very difficult to define, with attempts to restrict it within the limitations of language often failing. I appreciate his statement, which reflects some of our current and perhaps more universal feelings about spirituality as "the art of connecting oneself as a psychological whole with the world as a cosmic whole" (p. 21). This wholeness that one aspires to is perhaps explained by Carl Jung's notion of 'transcendent function' (1960) which Ann Belford Ulanov (1997) describes as a transition to the arrival of something new, a transcendence of our ego created in a symbolically evolving space, where the aim is contact with the unknown (Reiner, 2009).

Belford Ulanov (1997) talks about Jung's transcendent function as a process where the psyche slowly moves our ego from a position of center-stage to one which includes all our parts. This process is one of deconstruction of our known world, our known understanding, where one wrestles with the opposites in ourselves, in society and in our historical era. This struggle to go into ourselves and enter this unknowing state is one of participating in the uniting of our world.

I grew up in a monotheist paradigm with an understanding of there being one God that has its expression through the trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). My current belief system is more in line with panentheistic understanding, with the belief of God as encompassing all that has ever been, and all that will ever be, that God is in all things and all things are interconnected with each other and with God. To me God was, and continues to be, a relational experience of communion with the Divine.

Having been culturally immersed in a Judeo/Christian view of spirituality has significantly contributed to my experience of spirituality. From the personification of God in many religions, to more collective and integrated indigenous perspectives, spirituality's expression is as vast as time itself. I have 'tried on' different words to describe my own experience of spirituality, but at this stage in my life, I return to 'God' as the depiction of spirit/divine. My own experience of God finds itself reflected in Bion's concept of 'O – transcendent infinite reality' (as cited in Reiner, 2009). For me God is everywhere, and in all things, from the most transcendent mysteries to the minutest immanent intricate realities. Everything past and present is inextricably interwoven and intertwined, with many parts to one whole and with each part being a whole (Rohr, 2013).

From a spiritual developmental perspective, John Shea (1995a) describes a 'superego God' as one who experiences life as split within a closed system of subject-object dichotomy, where relationships within a dualistic world are distorted by transference. He outlines the transition from this stage to what he calls the 'God Beyond' in which split parts become a functioning whole. Richard Rohr (2019) describes this developmental process as one of going from 'order' in the first part of life, to 'disorder', and eventually to 'reorder'.

Transcendence is not derived from overcoming the barriers of superego/ego through a religious upward pathway to moral perfection through 'dying to the self', but is instead

becoming increasingly alive to the self, through a process of deeper exploration and integration into something more whole (Tacey, 2016).

Annie Reiner's (2009) perspective on the development of conscience describes the true self as developing from psychological birth with an experiencing of primitive emotional states. She highlights that higher mental functions are associated with a state of mind concordant with a transcendent perspective and this unfolds from an increasing capacity to think alongside these primitive states. Michael Washburn (1995) writes about the developmental phenomenon of psychological regression happening in the service of transcendence, depicted by two stages: the first being withdrawal from the world, and the second an encounter with the prepersonal unconscious. Reiner and Washburn similarly believe that what was repressed in the psyche during primal regression of the ego (and thus the development of a false self) is retrieved again through this process of regression.

The scope of this dissertation has been difficult to define within a boundary. Concepts of spirituality are far-reaching with every population group having their own version, description, understanding and experience of this within different cultural and religious frameworks. Not only that, but spirituality is not a new concept, not a new theory or idea. It surpasses generations, ancestry, time and space. It spans deities on the most ethereal levels, while being experienced in the everyday among the richest and the poorest of us, not bound by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, family, solidarity nor any other form of categorising that we attempt to establish in the hope of finding some sort of a sense of belonging amidst the chaos of our existence.

While the spiritual essence in me loathes to categorise anyone, least of all myself, for the purpose of framing the scope of this dissertation I must do this. So, I write this dissertation situated in myself as a Pakeha, identifying as a woman, and in my forties, living in Tamaki Makaurau, Aotearoa, in the year of 2019. Being heavily influenced by my family of origin and my friendships, as well as the church community through Christianity during my developmental years, has had a weighty impact on my experience of the world and on my version of spirituality. And while over the past decade I have individuated away from the more formal structural religious components of Christianity, I must acknowledge this has had a huge cultural impact on my development, and thus on this essay. Having said that, I want to be clear that this dissertation is not about Christianity or any formal religious system but is about a more broad and all-encompassing understanding of spirituality.

While there is plenty of literature on spirituality, and much discussion about the superego, my interest lies in what is their relationship with each other? Exploring this phenomenologically through a heuristic process is the direction of this dissertation. I acknowledge both these components are boundless in and of themselves, and the nature of exploring spirituality alone is one which knows no limit. How I contained the enormity of these concepts was by channeling it through myself as the vessel of exploration. I am the container of these concepts in this study, and the limits will be those which I impose simply by the limits of being a singular being in this moment in time. I intentionally kept the topic broad so my creative exploration of it could be expansive.

The aim was to gain some insight or understanding of the relationship between these two aspects of myself, with the hope of turning down the volume of my superego and turning up the volume of my awareness of spirituality.

How do I experience the relationship between the superego and spirituality?

TRUSTING THE PROCESS

Phenomenology is the study of what matters, rather than 'matter'

(Jordan Peterson, 1999)

I chose to approach this topic using a heuristic methodology. I was torn between hermeneutic and heuristic as they both would bring valuable insight into this topic. A hermeneutic approach was tempting to illicit understanding from insightful texts, and to enable an element of distance. However, as I went further into my research, thinking, therapy, and own process, I realised that I was already in a heuristic experience with this topic, so I chose to continue in that domain to seek meaning (Smythe, 2012). I chose an interpretive paradigm using a heuristic focus as this suits my writing style and internal research interest in a way that is more congruent with my true self, and I feel a personal account better reflects the nature of this topic. The benefits of a heuristic approach are that it creates a unique, deep and personal perspective on the topic. I believe this allows a paradigm to reach others in ways that a systematic review could not. A heuristic study on this deeply personal topic seems congruent with the emotive nature of it and this reflects the dynamic nature of relational psychotherapy. Through the expression of one's inquiry and journey, together we can hopefully discover meaning.

For the method, I followed Clark Moustaka's (1990) phases of heuristic inquiry: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and finally culmination, in a creative synthesis. The relationship between what exists in the world and my perception of this through my own conscious awareness is where my research lies, under the term Moustakas (1994) titles 'Transcendental Phenomenology'.

The word *heuristic* comes from the Greek word *heuriskein*, which means to discover or to find meaning (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas (1990) explains that the self of the researcher is present throughout the process, leading to increasing depth, understanding, and a growing sense of self-awareness and self-knowledge, through a wide and deep exploration. He says:

the deepest currents of meaning and knowledge take place within the individual through one's senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgements. This requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered (p. 15)

Sandy Sela-Smith (2002) highlights one of the risks of a heuristic inquiry – that the process can shift from the self who is having the experience, to the experience that the self is relating to, or observing – as being a valid threat to the purity of a self-search inquiry. The potential of the research turning into theory-based information, for good and sound reasons and from academic pressures, rather being than self-focused, was alarmingly threatening at times.

My philosophical perspective currently is: I am here, you are here, and in this here-ness we live. The challenge to me is: can I keep the essence of spirituality, which can be so amorphous and expansive, experiential and embodied, within a linguistic and academic framework. Perhaps the heuristic process is reflective of the non-quantifiable essence of spirituality, and attempting to reduce it within an academic construct is more reflective of the superego.

The question that arose as the topic of this dissertation is one which ‘I the researcher’, wanted some illumination on, something that has been a disturbance within me as I seek to understand myself, and the world, and the time in which we live (Moustakas, 1990). While this topic is exposingly personal and tremendously important to me, Moustakas adds there might also be a social, and perhaps universal, significance to this inquiry, and I add, even if no-one ever reads it. Engin Ozertugrul (2015) questions how we can validate a self-search as being relevant to society. If the data is acquired only from within me, and only interpreted by myself, can it in fact be useful to humanity? Later in the article he does admit to conforming to the view “that any effect on the self who enacts its own knowledge is an effect on society” (p. 12), highlighting that personal growth is one of the natural outcomes of self-research. That certainly was my hope, which then became my experience. Much like our personal therapy, anything we do for our personal growth will benefit others, including our clients.

My initial engagement with this topic felt like it had been emerging from within in me for some time, as Moustakas (1990) says “calling” out to me, almost a sense of demanding my attention and exploration. This topic has great significance to me, and I believe is an important consideration for many who struggle with the interchange of superego and spirit. The significance of the topic has gained momentum and intensified in its insistence for exploration over the course of the research. What started as something I was keen to explore and think about has turned into something deeply important for me.

Being diligently intentional about my immersion into this topic mirrors the seriousness with which I approach living in general, and my dedication to my study, learning, growth, the profession of psychotherapy, and coming alive to my one wild and precious life (Mary Oliver, 1992). Immersion occurred through exposure to literature, and participation with creative means of journaling, music, poetry and other arts. Contemplation was achieved through these means, as well as through meditation, prayer and communion with spirit and others, therapy, and continuing in the process of self-exploration and expansion through whatever means came to light.

What is key to a successful heuristic inquiry is eliciting a *depiction* of this experience (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Coming out of immersion was challenging, as I unexpectedly grew to love the process of heuristic inquiry and being immersed in the delicious cocoon of introverted thinking, experiencing, following my intuition into conglomerate spaces, reading and writing. It mutated into a romantic affair for me, and as is the case with love, it knows not its chooser. There is a sense in me that the topic, the method and the process all chose me. To have been whole-heartedly and affectionately in partnership with this process has been completely unexpected and such a pleasant surprise. So, to pull myself out of this delicious space was as unappealing as getting out of a hot shower on a wet cold day.

I planned the incubation phase as a time where I hoped to retreat from the intensity of the research and engage in other activities unrelated to the research. This proved to be somewhat difficult given the nature of the topic; the superego and spirituality being inherent and therefore unable to be disengaged from, as well as the heuristic process not being particularly formulaic. Moustakas (1990) believes the phase of incubation allows for the more implicit tacit knowing and intuition to come to more awareness and thus extends our awareness to areas beyond the immediacy of our focused attention. He describes the experience or process of intuition as a bridge between more explicit forms of knowing and implicit (or tacit) knowing. This is reflective of psychotherapy, as I see psychotherapy as bridges of deepening awareness and increasing knowing; between that which we are conscious of and that which is unconscious; bridges between isolation and relationship, between being asleep and waking up; bridges between that which we know and that which we do not yet know, between suffering and healing, dying and coming to life. The intuitive role in heuristic research leads us to places of increasing depth and adds essential meaning to the discovery process (Moustakas, 1990).

As I continued through the heuristic journey, I noticed how non-linear this process is. Towards the beginning of this quest I thought the stages seemed appropriate and that I could systematically (oh how my superego loves systemization, logic and certainty!) pace myself through them over the journey of this dissertation. However, as my experience deepened into the process, I noticed it was much messier than that. I could experience going from immersion to incubation to illumination within one day, and certainly over the course of a week or a few weeks. Perhaps this was partly due to the nature of my topic in that, in my view of spirituality, it is fluid, unrehearsed, pliable and without certainty. Also I think it is a reflection of who I am: that I receive some perhaps false comfort from having the perceived certainty of how things will go day-to-day, week-to-week, and want to believe in a formula or mathematical algorithm, even if it is complicated, and that there is a guarantee of a result and outcome. The heuristic process feels the antithesis of this; there is no certainty of anything other than following the vague nature of this process. At times I wondered if any outcome, result or conclusion would arise.

It was hoped the illumination phase would bring clarity and differing thoughts, insights and perspectives as I created some distance from the topic by engaging in other activities, thus generating a change in the perception of the topic (Kenny, 2012). At some points in the process, and most likely when I was more immersed in the topic and therefore not yet ready

for illumination, I worried that insight or new understanding might not emerge. The uncertainty of this felt quite bleak at times and I pondered the potential of being a researcher who remained in the dark, gaining no new thoughts, my ideas remaining fragmented and scattered. I wondered if clarity and insight, in a succinct and collated way, is something for just a few, and often I felt clumsy and dithery, unable to consolidate my thoughts into something more coherent. As a surprise to my melancholic parts, there have been moments where my 'fairy thoughts' have become something more comprehensible, where illumination has taken place. Illumination has more often been at times when I was least aware of looking for it. As Moustakas (1990) highlights, illumination is catching those aspects that we previously missed or misunderstood, that have now made themselves known to us. Breakthroughs into my awareness and knowing and conscious self have been through unexpected means and ones which often surprised me.

Explication is where I examined what arose through the heuristic inquiry to bring some understanding of what meaning this process might hold, both for myself, for interested others, for my clients and for psychotherapy. The purpose of explication is examining what has been awakened to consciousness, to bring understanding and meaning (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas emphasizes the importance of focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure, while recognising that any meaning elicited is coming from my own internal frame of reference, and therefore is highly influenced by this. Naturally I lean towards internal experiential knowing, however, I am aware of the influence and perhaps demanding nature of academic and intellectualized requirements qualifying legitimate research as that which is imbedded in the knowledge of honoured and published thinkers, theorists and experts who have gone before. Thoughts without theoretical backing are perhaps viewed as insubstantial and thus less worthy of attention. This perhaps reflects not only my superego, but also the institutional academic superego of expectation within the parameters of a certain value. I did my best to navigate the balance of these tensions throughout this piece of work.

Creative Synthesis is the hope that "strands of experience and understanding that have emerged in the research are brought together to form a coherent whole" (Kenny, 2012, p. 8). Moustakas (1990) calls on tacit and intuitive powers to enable this final phase. There is often a certain fear associated with such means as it feels wide-open, uncertain and with no guarantees. For someone who can find comfort, but also boredom and dreariness, in mathematical 'certainty', this was a risky phase. What if it does not all come together? What if my creative intuition lets me down? What if it all ends with a cumbersome thud? These fears and ponderings are another reflection of the voice demanding perfection. And while I know that perfection is an illusion and that this is just another reflection of the superego, it is there, lurking in the shadows, whispering threats to my creativity, seducing me to eat the apple of eternal sleep, summoning me back to the void spaces of nothingness. I remind myself that the measure of validity of a heuristic inquiry is not that of statistical data, nor of intellectual prowess, but the "question of validity is one of *meaning*" (own italics) (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). And only I, as the researcher, can accurately assess whether meaning was experienced and created.

Rose & Loewenthal (as cited in Loewenthal & Winter, 2006) identify the benefit of a heuristic study as enabling an exploration of a lived experience, thus enabling an openness to what might emerge. Conversely, they argue that the limits of heuristic research are that the researcher is at the center of the research, therefore its ability to represent anything or anyone other than itself is limited. I was mindful of this significant bias throughout my writings.

What has been most significant to me in my heuristic journey is the deep experiencing of something meaningful, and even at times profound and, despite its simplicity, this has been transformational. That is the piece of this process that I hold most dear, and whether it can be conveyed through my words in this writing I am unsure, but what matters to me has been my own lived experience of this inquiry and the elements of transformation that have taken place for me.

Dearth

It feels appropriate and pertinent to commence my exploration of the superego and spirituality from a primitive and formative space. A space which can be difficult to think about and therefore to write about, but fundamental, as it forms the basis of my development as well as the basis to so much of this topic and exploration.

Paranoid/Schizoid State

My deepest and most terrifying feelings of being tormented by the superego seem to arise from a paranoid/schizoid space. Early in my exploration of this topic I suffered a concussion, which undoubtedly influenced and intensified this feeling state. I felt compelled to express my experience of being in this space and have included this piece from my journal, as it was an attempt to express what this state is like for me. I feel it depicts the superego in a way that is different from its typical understanding, perhaps more reflective of an early stage of development in infancy. In my experience of myself there is this unprocessed, deep, painful and unconscious component to my superego *and* the more conscious, critical, judgemental part of my superego which most likely developed later, in early childhood.

It is in this frightening sink-hole state of fear, paranoia, and splitting that I find the biggest impact takes place. A) on relationships it is anger, rage, and fury that precedes or is the beginning state of this position, leading to isolation, regret, self-sabotage and SUPEREGO dominance. B) to spirituality leaving me feeling abandoned, soul-trauma/murder (Shengold, 2001), paranoid dependence (God is the only one who I can rely on/who understands me/sees me/cares) OR total abandonment by humankind and

Godkind (I really am all alone in this/the world/my experience – which is all that feels real at this time – perspective or other states are gone from consciousness – this is hell on earth – complete aloneness - & it is all my fault – and I don't deserve love or to have my needs met, ? omnipotence within myself leading to a depleted yet powerful state causing me to be desperate for another's love/care but stubborn to push it away and re-enforce my self-determined isolated state). My body feels SHUT DOWN – I don't feel hunger, don't notice a full bladder, don't want to speak, no words, want to be disconnected (while deep yearning for human contact), sometimes want to sleep/close my eyes but also can't sleep, retreat retreat retreat.

Later, I wrote this entry:

I'm really not sure I believe in God anymore. I feel so deserted, hurt and let-down by others. In the past that would have taken me to God – in desperation (people have hurt me/let me down, but God hasn't – with scripture to back this up) and internal words such as "at least I have God if I have no-one else". Now God seems as empty as the people here with me – void of heart/care, absent in every way. There is no solace. Alone... Defeated... Empty... The depth of this sadness is immense.

What I notice about this more fragmented and distressing space is the heavy nature of the superego, looming large and bleak, ominously threatening to strip any form of life away from me with its power to seductively allure me to life-less deathly parts. It is difficult to write about, perhaps an indication of how these states are more pre-verbal, infantile and primitive, therefore having less thought and language to articulate them well. This is frustrating as these states feel incredibly significant for understanding the superego; the judgemental more punitively critical components emerging later in development.

A few months after these journal entries, this paranoid/schizoid experience went even deeper, to a state in which there were no longer any words. When I did try to find some words, they were; *vacuum*, emptiness, tears, alone, afraid ... and I created an artwork, which I named 'Dearth'.

The first picture is how it was in my head – an empty dull landscape. Then I added my silhouette. Finally, I was drawn to create some diversity and detail to the earth; this was random and haphazard. I painted my silhouette with dirt from my garden, and I see myself here as gender-less, age-less and culture-less.





The feelings that accompany this state are that of depression and discouragement, hopelessness and a generally bleak outlook on life. My fear in this state was that it could persist, that I could be stuck in the wilderness of nothingness forever, with no profound experience and nothing meaningful to write. Trusting the heuristic process during these places of dearth felt risky and even dangerous. I noticed myself not wanting to be around people, and when I was, I noticed feeling so irritated by everyone and everything, which may also be reflective of the concussion. These feelings were difficult to tolerate, and I wanted to totally isolate, to protect others from me (my superego) and protect myself from seeing my own thoughts and feelings towards others. The confronting nature of this space scares me back into myself, to spaces where I feel existential dread, and the fear of a dead-end, or perhaps worse – not living, but not dying either – unpoetically, nothingness.

Some weeks after this artwork was completed, I noticed the dirt-paint had formed a natural curl to it, at the base of the spine. Mirabai Starr (2019) describes Kundalini from Hindu mythology as a “subtle body, coiled as a serpent at the base of the spine, the root chakra” (p. 63). She outlines how spiritual practices can rouse this slumbering life-force, bursting through the chakras and bringing them, with her, and us, to life. Kundalini is thought to be associated with the divine feminine, which is fascinating as the awakening of my awareness of the feminine has been a significant component to my process, which will be discussed later. I mention this, as the ebb, and flow of nothingness interspersed with discovery has been evident throughout this journey.

Superego

*At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed
my eyes.*

My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed.

The blackness of eternal night encompassed me.

(E.A. Poe, 1842, in Mary Oliver, 2016)

As outlined earlier, the superego is formed and re-enforced throughout our early development (Ewen, 2010, Reiner, 2009). As I have paid attention to my superego, I have noticed many influencing factors contributing to its formation and persisting strength – intrapsychically, interpersonally and transpersonally – in my life. With awareness comes the knowledge of the jarring negative components of the superego. Spirituality, while often being a counterbalance to this negativity, in Orthodox Christian doctrine, can also have its own version of pressure, demands and expectations.

Jarring Negativity

Negativity rears its ugly head in my psyche all too often. The choice of the word ‘superego’ is less than ideal as its judgemental nature has a relentless tendency to leave me feeling even further downtrodden. When I generally feel critical at every turn – in my relationships, about my therapy, about my work, about being a psychotherapist, about the demands of working/studying/parenting/running a household, about finances – I feel depleted and anaemic. What compounds this is the awareness that this negativity leaves me hating this about myself; I critique my critic.

Like a tonic, I can use spirituality, God, worship and nature at these times to calm myself. This is where I can go to feel some peace, acceptance without expectation, and nothing other than presence. But it does not seem to last, and I tend to revert to a negative

worldview with such ease and familiarity, like a default setting, a slow decline to lifelessness. When I am more aware of the superego, whether it be mine, my family's, or society's, it feels jarring, sharp, harsh, rigid, structured, demanding and constricting.

The familiarity of this, and the sense that it has been there my whole life, can be disheartening. Given the introjection of my primitive rage mixed with the strong expectations and critique of my family, my community, my church, my nationality, and our current social climate, there is no wonder this holds such impenetrable defiance. The despairing sense that I cannot seem to get any genuine traction towards another way of being in the world and the hopeless pull of this negativity, leaves me trapped in my guilt and shame. I retreat into the deep recesses of my soul, protecting others from myself, tucked away from the perilous world, isolated and alone in my harsh internal world.

To whom much is given

Jesus is quoted in the Bible as saying, "to whom much is given much will be required" (Luke 12:48, Good News Translation), or for a fuller translation; "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded: and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (New International Version). This verse has been a huge influence in my life, ringing in my ears for what seems my whole life. It plays like a sick tormenter with my superego, increasing the demands on me and how I live my life. I perceive myself as having been given much: being white middle-class, living in Aotearoa, in a comfortable house in a well-equipped community, having a well and able body, intellectual capacity, a compassionate heart, professional skill, varied abilities, plentiful opportunities, loving people in my life; the list goes on. This scripture, while I once used it to motivate me and keep me going, has turned into a cruel taskmaster, often taking me to the brink of burnout or collapse.

Society's superego expectations for me as a woman living at this time in history, and who is expected to achieve in everything, are immense: to achieve motherhood to a high standard; to prove in my work that I can make my way in now my second career in life; to love and serve the community; to have a fulfilling and exemplary love relationship; to contribute meaningfully to the suffering of the world as well as to academia; to maintain meaningful contact with family and friends; to be interconnected-with and caring-of our planet; to embody the feminine in ways that honour being a woman at this time; to have creative forms of self-care to maintain this list, and to do all this in a spiritually inspired framework – these expectations of myself are often overwhelming.

My superego has often been liberated by God and spirituality while simultaneously being imprisoned by doctrine and misinterpretation of scriptures and teachings. What set me free has also haunted me. And while I desire transcendence of my superego, I have grown to discover the importance of its transformation. Theologians and psychoanalytic theorists, as outlined below, have helped me understand this in the context of spiritual development, in transference, and in repression.

Spiritual development and the superego

Throughout my inquiry I have found that it seems consistently true that the struggle with the dominance of the superego is a developmental phenomenon. John Shea (1995) writes about the stages of spiritual development in the context of the 'superego God' and 'the God beyond'. The 'superego God' is a state where the self is split, God is split, and the group is split leaving the individual in a system of subject-object dichotomy. The 'God beyond' is where there is a functioning whole, an understanding of God that transcends the superego, and that is no longer influenced by transference.

Shea (1995a) uses the term 'fettered imaging', which in psychotherapy we might refer to as 'transference'. Our child and adolescent experience of God and life is a version of transference from our oedipal experiences and other influential relationships. The self, or ego perhaps, is underdeveloped and thus, understandably, needs to rely on the experience of relationship with others in order to understand and make sense of the world, and of God. Someone in this developmental stage is trapped between contradictions of trust and anxiety, guilt and conformity, comforting acceptance and isolating guilt, doubt and disbelief, all of which place the individual (and, might I add, the group/community/nation) in a state of conflict, almost forcing them into a state of *modus vivendi*, a temporary and perhaps non-verbalised or even unconscious agreement allowing the conflicting parts/peoples to co-exist in peace (Merriam-Webster, 1828). I think about Te Tiriti o Waitangi as being perhaps a reflection of a larger state of this *modus vivendi* in our nation of Aotearoa. How much of this 'agreement' between the tangata whenua and the colonising forces was disguised as attempting to 'keep the peace' but in fact has kept us locked in this state of 'superego God' subduing the marginalised and giving more power to the dominant, promoting individualism, separatism and the pursuit of ego ideals, all while our people and our whenua suffer. My dissertation has been an individual pursuit of growth and expansion, but I also wonder if, on a much larger scale, we need to acknowledge the restrictive dynamics of the constraining, dichotomy rule-bound, superego-driven group culture in which we live, and hope to one day move towards an expansive and inclusive universalising culture, one which has collectively transformed the superego.

James (as cited in Shea, 1995a) observes religious experiences as being rooted in mystical states of consciousness, a state of self that is no longer divided. Earlier in my heuristic process I wondered if it were these mystical states of my being that needed nourishment rather than attempting to quiet-down the superego forces. Being in a conscious battle with the superego, where there must be a winner and loser, and where I could potentially force myself into a more advanced developmental stage out of sheer will or intellectual understanding, seemed idealistically ingenuous. What I ended up discovering was a more embodied experience, where I could surrender to what already is, which will be discussed later.

God transference and repression

James Finnegan (1970) reminds us how transference, in Freud's perspective, is a primordial disease, one believed to be able to be 'worked through' in psychoanalysis, perhaps rather dramatically believing that religion prior to psychoanalysis was a helpful illusion based upon "unlimited transference" (p. 478) to an eternal and heavenly God. He rather powerfully states that according to this theory "psychoanalysis must, therefore, replace religion" (p. 478). He contrasts this with Niebuhr and Tillich who he believes failed to develop a 'psychological infrastructure' in their theological doctrines of transcendence, in an attempt to move beyond a superego religion, and this led to the "death-of-God" (p. 477) theology (atheism). This can lead to a higher form of repression – divine repression – as it has failed to "pass through the dynamics of the superego" (p. 478). A harsh and demanding superego leads to a repressive and neurotic sense of being alienated from what one perceives one should be, thus creating distance. Psychoanalysis attempts to collapse the distance by working through the transference that gives birth to superego domination. Finnegan cites Homans (1970) as believing it is in the "working through" (p. 478) of the transference that the reality of transcendence is to be found, and this happens by being grounded in and embodied by richly subjective, immanent and immediate human life.

Neville Symington (2006) in his article about sanity and madness talks about how if an internal existence is chaotic, that chaos needs to be unified somehow and somewhere, and that can be thrust into an external system that makes it look like we are unified. This could be in the form of another person, the psychotherapist, systems such as religion, self-psychology or theorists, to name a few. He says, "it looks as though I act from personal conviction, but closer scrutiny shows that my chaotic jelly is entombed within a rigid external imagistic boundary" (p. 1060).

While I find these intellectually and psychoanalytically tempting theories have sound validity, I have some hesitation in fully embracing them. The temptation to pathologise religion/spirituality is nothing new. Donald Kalsched's (2013) alternative, discussed in the section on trauma, as perhaps a more humanising and less pathologizing theory, sits more comfortably for me as I seek to compassionately understand the human experience.

Transcending Transforming the superego

I deliberately left the crossed out 'transcending' in the title of this section as this was my first thought and hope about the superego – that it could be transcended. Over the course of this inquiry I have come to wonder if it may be more about 'transforming' our superego, rather than transcending it. It seems that only a few can transcend and have this short-cut to a transcended life. Grotstein (2004), in his discussion of Bion's writings, identifies that mystics can detour straight to O (wisdom), but the rest of us need to go through the transformation in K (knowledge) to get there. Grotstein suggests that the ultimate achievement of wisdom and serenity is in fact through the transformation from O to K. Annie Reiner (2009) suggests the superego is only going to lose its power through the

resurrection of our primitive states with a thinking other together in the presence of O to thus generate wisdom, healing and wholeness.

In a defensive attempt to avoid primitive states, my omnipotent wish to control life creates a false sense of order and this aligns rather aptly with an omnipotent God.

Omnipotence and the superego

Henri Rey's (1994) thoughts stimulated my thinking about the omnipotent nature of the superego. One must believe in one's superiority of thought in order to have power over another, as in the case of a punitive superego structure. It is unpleasant, to say the least, to enter an observing ego stance with the truth of my superego. Noticing how ferocious it can be, both to the external world and towards myself, is something I could easily be tempted to overlook, or even worse, stand up for, and to me this is when it becomes quite sickening, aligning more with the bleaker side of our life-force. I cannot help but notice the similarity of this to the omnipotent God, the ultimate superego force, judging right and wrong, being the decider in our destination to either eternal bliss or destruction. This leads me to think about the cultural nature of the superego. The omnipotent colonising nature of Eurocentrism, along with the evangelising pressures of Christianity, make for a potent concoction, promising forgiveness and new life whilst leaving a wake of obliteration and destruction. It is hard to face the squeamish reality that we are, and perhaps always will be, creatures driven far too much by our superego, our shadow, our need to dominate and control, which is an externalised attempt to control our internal chaos.

Winnicott identifies a transitional space where the baby transforms from omnipotence to the reality principle (as cited in Kalsched, 2013). Henri Rey (1994) describes how the omnipotent need to be bigger than the initial harmful externalised object, that then becomes an internalised object, gives the illusion of superseding it and thus no longer being harmed by it. This is a self-protective act, much like dissociation protects us from being destroyed by traumatic events that are too enormous to bear. To move from a position of an omnipotent cruel superego to a place of acceptance of reality is the work of reparation (Rey, 1994). This perhaps leads us to a place of acceptance that life is unfair, that we have no power to change anything and anyone, perhaps other than ourselves, and that judging reality is not accepting it.

Neville Symington (2006) describes his understanding of madness as being broken into bits, and to be sane as being united. Internal chaos, along with an absence of an inner government, is embodied in shame. Omnipotence derives from shame. When contemplating Symington's thoughts, I have started to wonder that when the superego is more prominent within me, reflecting a state of omnipotence, this is an indicator that I am experiencing shame, and feeling more fractured, jelly-like, chaotic. Perhaps like litmus paper indicating the presence of acid, the superego and its omnipotent characteristics are an alert to internal discombobulated states. Our unease with these states is so uncomfortable and unconscious that we might not even be aware of our shame and act out of the more familiar known state of control, giving us the illusion of omnipotence. This feels more empowering

and familiar than acknowledging and facing the terror of internal scattered states. Having an empathic understanding of this enables me to see that when my superego feels most destructive, when I feel so self-critical and anti-self, or anti-others, I am in fact, suffering inside in a jelly-like state. These are the times that I judge myself as most abhorrent, but in fact these could be the times that I am most vulnerable and needing the most care, compassion and containing. If I could learn to give true empathy to the superego, which is perhaps more accurately a mask for internalised chaos, things could be quite different in myself and in my world.

The theorists bring knowledge to what can feel like isolating, scattered and desolate spaces, and with that knowledge comes understanding, and with understanding comes growth and change. But what has been more surprising throughout this journey is how paying attention to normal every-day events has equally, and perhaps more memorably, provided opportunities for thought, knowledge and insight.

The fighting superego

An unexpected relational experience took me by surprise. Fighting with someone close to me I noticed that the harsher negative words were not landing on me like they used to. As the colourful conversation went on, I noticed the more supportive or positive words also were not landing. I was fascinated to notice this: how neither the 'bad' nor the 'good' were having any impact on me. This led me to wonder whether, in order to let-go of the power of my superego over me, I need to let-go of the good as well as the bad. That 'positive' feedback is just as dangerous as 'negative' feedback; both are a judgement, therefore neither hold any usefulness. Letting go of the good is almost scarier to me than letting go of the bad. The good is what has propped me up all my life, almost like a form of nutrition. But like any meal, the sustenance runs out and then I need another meal or fix. As much as I need to give up my fear of people's harsh judgements, I also need to give up my need for people to think that I am awesome!

This led me to think about God as the ultimate superego force in my life: that he/she/it is neither good nor bad; that God simply *is*, and we and all living things simply *are*.

Trauma

Spirituality is really, what we do with our pain and suffering.

(Christopher Defibaugh, in personal communication, 2018)

Too sensitive

Being criticised as ‘too sensitive’ or ‘too soft’ my whole life has been something that has felt like a curse; at one end it is an annoyance to others, and at the other end my sensitivities feel empathically pulled to others’ pain and hurt, to be needed as a balm for their disturbance. I can feel this one-on-one as well as atmospherically in groups of people, in buildings, communities and perhaps even nations. My inner energy and its tendency to be sapped of life simply by being around other people, can be depleting. And while this may sound like an introvert speaking, and I am that too, I think it does speak to a reality of the wounded soul. As Donald Kalsched (2013) highlights, “the notorious hypersensitivity in these patients... is intimately connected to certain intuitive capacities for attunement and empathy with others and with the world we live in” (p. 192). As I have been known to say many times over my life, being too sensitive is both a curse and a blessing. Being a judgement indicates alignment with the superego, but through seeking understanding I find its heritage in the origins of trauma.

Trauma

The components of superego and spirituality seem intrinsically intertwined, and their root seems embedded in trauma. Would there be much of a need for spirituality or would there be much of a superego if it were not for trauma?

As I work with my clients, who come from significant backgrounds of childhood and then adult trauma, I experience their superego forces in the room. Their anger and unconscious rage or hatred permeates my being at times and often leaves me feeling a range of sadness, anger and hopelessness, or at times, in desperation, calling out to God or a supernatural force to help me, to help them, to help us. At times, this desperation leaves me feeling like there is no other option. Where else does one go when all forms of human relationship have been betraying? But then I go to the betrayal of God him/herself in those times of trauma too. The analogy of God carrying you on his shoulders when one feels desperately alone seems minimising and far from the truth. God feels the furthest away at those times of utter despair. And that is another deep despairing component of trauma, that of the perceived abandonment of everyone, as well as a higher being.

Larry Decker (1993) talks about the role that trauma has in spiritual development. He says, “it is possible to see all of life as a process of spiritual growth with trauma demanding that we give up our ordinary ideas to encompass a significantly changed reality” (p.40). He suggests that trauma insists that we question our ordinary perspectives and search for a

more expanded self-concept. Decker says, “despair will only be overcome if the trauma survivor acts out of the innate/transpersonal self instead of the interactively formed ego” (p 41). I particularly resonate with his statement that “trauma presents the survivor with the existential paradox that *demands the transcendent be discovered in the immanent*” (own italics) (p. 44). I will talk further about the transcendent and immanent later.

James Grotstein (2004) explains that if the beta-elements are not met by an adequate container (as in the case of relational trauma survivors) these elements are evacuated as projective identification into soma and/or internal or external objects. These internalised objects become a wasteland for these unprocessed beta-elements and may be characterised by psychotic, traumatic, chaotic and severe superego objects. His explanation is that a harsh superego is a symptom of unmet and unprocessed primitive feelings, or infantile states, as much as somatic expressions, addictions, psychoses, borderline functioning or any other forms of symptomatology. The person that we may judge as having a ‘harsh critic’ is perhaps more fundamentally suffering from deep and disturbing internal realities of unmet primitive states, and this is simply the way it is manifesting on the surface.

Leonard Cohen (1984) wrote the song *Hallelujah* and his lyrics speak to the trauma that I see and experience:

Maybe there's a God above
But all I've ever learnt from love
Was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya.
And it's not a cry that you hear at night
It's not somebody who's seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

And when I hear the haunting nature of these words sung with such meaning, I feel the depth of my own pain, along with the pain of others, and for me it highlights our capacity and even our need to acknowledge and draw-near to something greater than ourselves, something bigger than our pain. And his words that acknowledge the anguish and reality of real love, stir something deep inside me, even perhaps in those parched landscapes which feel so isolated and lifeless. And it seems this dance between the harsh realities of being alive interspersed with the simplicity of spirituality is where we can have some experiences of relief.

Understanding how trauma is involved in influencing our psycho-spiritual development provides some context and holding in the form of theory, as a humane space in which to be compassionate towards the complex dynamics of our individual and collective existence.

Psycho-spiritual trauma theory and the divided self

Donald Kalsched (2013) outlines different theorists and their understanding of trauma, describing the development of a self that is divided, and how this influences relationship to the spiritual.

Ronald Fairbairn (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) identifies an early split of the ego and object relations between the accepting object and the rejecting object, with another split between the 'little girl', the one that existed before the trauma and who is innocent, and the 'martyr' which holds the infant's omnipotence and idealisation. 'Bad' objects are internalised in an attempt to control them and keep the outer objects 'good', and it is in this understanding that the familiar statement of "identification with the aggressor" (Ferenczi, Anna Freud, as cited in Kalsched, 2013) is formulated. In this view, the inner world is seen as mostly persecutory (a harsh superego) with negative affective tones. Kalsched (2013) adds that the inner world can also be a sanctuary for positive, innocent child states which can be linked to a mytho-poetic nature. The soul wounded by trauma perhaps simultaneously has a more natural, open and symbiotic relationship with transcendence, encapsulating the individual "between the worlds" (p. 190). This special connection, as Jerome Bernstein names it 'trans-rational reality' (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) can potentially be seen as different. Those without this reality may struggle to contemplate or rationalise it, and perhaps out of the inadequacy felt in our own fear, to pathologise it.

John Steiner's psychic retreats (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) are described as an internal refuge or cave where we can hide and feel safe, avoiding anxiety and pain but also escaping reality and remaining in a space where omnipotence and phantasy can continue to rule and dominate. As identified earlier, an omnipotent stance, while a defensive protection of pain, also keeps us from acceptance of reality, which in many cases of trauma is not only understandable but also necessary for continued survival. Kalsched critiques Steiner's view as potentially pathologizing the retreated inner world as 'bad' and therefore being liberated from it as 'good', and in so doing he overlooks the nature of this encapsulated protected space as a life-saving sanctum until such a time that one can risk experience or exposure to reality and the world.

Kalsched (2013) outlines other theorists describing various interpretations of the divided self of trauma survivors. Ferenczi (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) describes the internal split of self as between the "regressed self" that retreats into the unconscious mind, and the "progressed self", that had to grow up too fast to protect the regressed self. The progressed self can represent both angelic or protective archetypes as well as demonic or persecutory archetypes. Winnicott (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) identified the "true self" and the "false self" where the false-self identified with the mind, leaving the true-self alone in the body, potentially leading to psychosomatic illness. Reiner (2009) identifies that the false self leads

to mental death, while the true self incorporates feeling, thinking and a developing awareness. Fairbairn (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) made the distinction between the internal split between the victim infant self and the perpetrator complex. Guntrip (as cited in Kalsched, 2013) describes how the innocent child exposed to neglect or abuse learns to hate their own immaturity and thus identifies with the abusive or bad parent, causing a split between the lost, and increasingly unconscious, child-self and the destructive parent-self. These theorists all highlight “that traumatic dissociation in the child leaves an inner world divided between regressed and progressed inner objects” (Kalsched, 2013, p. 12).

The progressed-self’s or false-self’s very attempts to protect the vulnerable or regressed self end up keeping the true-self trapped, hidden behind the illusory control of the false sense of security of an omnipotent superego. Much like Herbert Rosenfeld’s (1971) concept of the internalised gang, the omnipotent internal object gains more power in its attempt to protect the vulnerable self, but in that process cuts off the regressed self’s need, dependency and vulnerability. The false omnipotent self ends up attacking the very thing that is the undeveloped but healthy part of the self.

The rigidity of splitting the self into parts is something that, while I find interesting and receive some understanding and explanation from, it also leaves me feeling a bit cold and numb. Something about compartmentalising our complexity seems in some ways aligned with a structure somewhat reflective of the superego, and while bringing intellectual understanding and assistance to clinical work, it perhaps lacks some of the subtlety of the spirit, of our collective interpersonal fluidity. And it leaves me craving for sustenance and wisdom of a more poetic kind, desiring to be vulnerable, seduced into intimacy.

VULNERability

Do we cry in the womb?

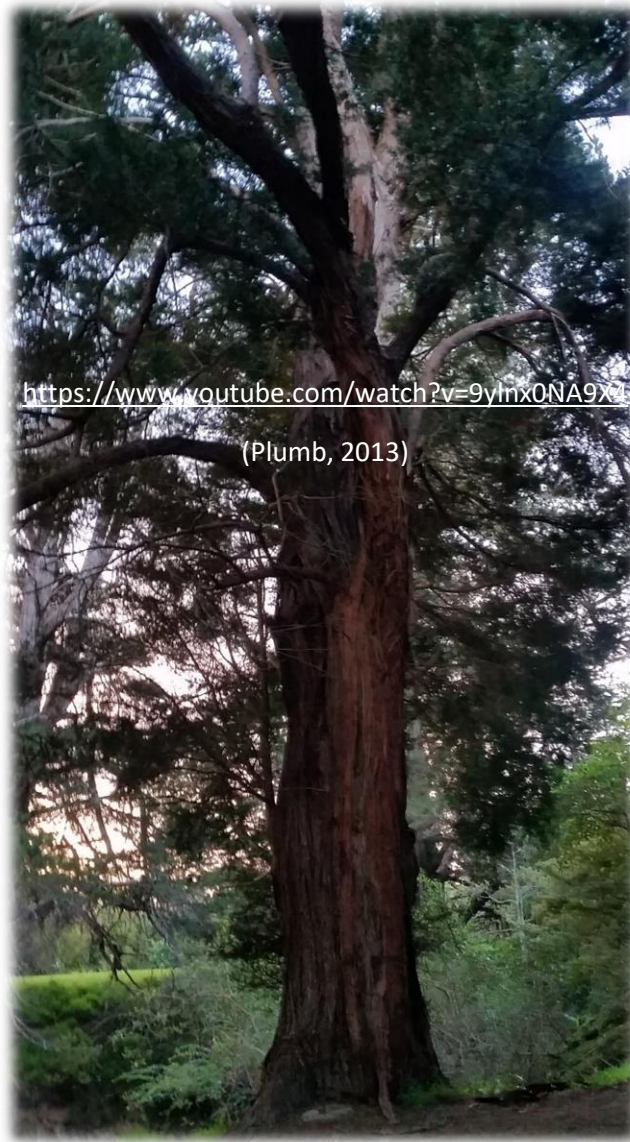
Vulnerability and intimacy

In my times of deep sadness, I notice softness accompanying this. When I am vulnerable, both with myself and with others, I am open, gentle, exposed, transparent to the deepest parts of myself. At these times I notice the superego is quiet, the harsh voices and thoughts taking a backseat to the rawness of my existence. I think of the book and movie *The Shack*, and how when the main character, Mackenzie, was crying, the Holy Spirit gently touched his tears and collected them. Later in the movie those same tears were used to water the burial site of Mackenzie’s daughter, and from them life was birthed, in explosive, colourful and varied flora. I have thought a lot about this image and have grown up with the knowledge of the Bible scripture by David in Psalms 56:8: “*You keep track of all my sorrows, you have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.*”

I notice I do not have a lot of words about this, as it feels too precious for language, too ephemeral for the limitations of prose, too vulnerable for the potential hurt of misunderstanding, and it is, simply, too beautiful.

Intimacy is something that has been highlighted as a personal struggle for me through the process of this inquiry. Perhaps I am more avoidant than I care to admit, and this interrupts me from intimately connecting with myself, with others, with my clients. The divine can be alluring as a safe, intimate love-affair partner, one that is abstract and amorphous, being able to be what we need in any given moment. How tantalising that can seem, and I wonder if perhaps some of the older feminine mystics were in this space, where they could have a safe love-affair with an all-loving creator, rather than having to face the messy world of human partnerships? It is a quandary though, as one can feel an enticing pull to the mystical world of an all-encompassing spiritual transcendence and a relationship with a benevolent, invisible and mysterious force that can do you no harm, versus an embodied experience with the flesh/incarnate which is fraught with all the ambiguous uncertainties of our and others' fractured, frightened and ferocious selves.

As my body automatically parks the car in the hospital grounds, amidst the masses of others negotiating the balance between sickness and health, life and death, I drag my limbs like lead weights through the grounds. I diligently take the stairs, flight after flight, heart racing faster, breaths heavier, head lighter, perhaps not from physical exertion but more from inadvertently separating the enormity of what I feel from the reality of what I need to face. I walk the corridors and people's faces contact mine, many more so than usual. And they do not just look through me or even at me, they are connecting with something in me that is also in them. Tears invisibly cascade down my cheeks and it is as though they are the only ones who can see them, and there is a knowingness in this that holds some sort of divine comfort, much more so than any doctor's words or pharmaceutical medicines. There is something happening in the unspoken, untouched, unthought spaces between us that reminds me that, despite everything screaming my aloneness within me, we are together.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ylnx0NA9X7>

(Plumb, 2013)

A week later, this time my heart racing and legs burning from propelling my rusty bike, held together more by prayer than steel, along the weaving path. My face is wet, this time, from the gentle fall of spring rain, quickly to be replaced by the warmth of the sun embracing my back. The trees stretch their elongated necks heavenwards, while their roots nobble out of the earth, reminding me of their presence long before me and long after. The sparrows and blackbirds, tui and ducks scatter in the air and the fields. I notice not whether they are the same as last spring or is this a new generation in our midst. Despite my ambiguous attention to detail, their presence remains and for this I am grateful. The tides of time herald their rhythm in the flow of life.

The beauty and strangeness of the world may fill the eyes with its cordial refreshment. Equally it may offer the heart a dish of terror. On one side is radiance; on another is the abyss.

(Mary Oliver, 2016, p. 113)

Solitude

Arnold Modell identifies that it is in solitude that we can be open to the numinous, to experiences of another dimension that can replenish us (as cited in Kalsched, 2013). He links the private self to the soul and the psyche and outlines how this private self is constructed as a form of protection of our vulnerable self from intrusions. These thoughts around solitude stimulated my awareness that most of my deepest insights, and my one-ness, are found in solitude. Talking about them or writing about them helps solidify them but it is in the private spaces of our internal worlds that we hold the dearest communion with that which is beyond thought and word. It is here that our bleakest destroyers and our harmonious holiness coexist, and it is here that we hold our truest selves. Perhaps our most poignant manifestations of our awareness of life are here, in this inner landscape; we are birthed alone, we dream alone, and we die alone. We can take a break from everyone else except ourselves.

However, the solitude is a space that is also conflicted. It is a conundrum of mixed feelings from pleasure and ease, tranquillity and harmony, inspiration and insight, to desperate loneliness, isolation, abandonment and despair. The space that is open to the transcendent is also the space that is poisoned with dearth, with a sense of a loss of what could be, a longing for relationship, for knowing and for love.

TRANSCENDENT/IMMANENT

The mundane

In John O'Connor's article on 'Madness of the Mind' (2018) he uses the word 'mundane' to describe spirituality. I felt troubled, shocked and perplexed by this, like it was almost heretical to be so ordinary about something that can be so extraordinary. During this journey my former husband remarried and, on that day, I could not settle, feeling so outcast and wanting to support my children, but not being able to, and having a strange sense of something I could not identify. Later in the day I went for a walk and I was listening to some worship music (this form of music can often be a gateway for me to the Divine) and I noticed a lady walking towards me glance to her left. As I reached that same spot, I looked over and there was a beautiful sunset. Nothing monumental, no glistening beach, no towering mountains, just the sun setting in suburbia, just like any other old day. It captured my attention though and I instantly sat down on someone's verge by the side of the road and simply took it in. I was present with that moment, and I felt settled for the first time that day. There was nothing dynamic or special about it, it was rather ordinary, and it just 'was' (as Grotstein [2004] says, "O just is"). It really was beautiful, and it accompanied me all the way home past a sweet girl who stopped on her scooter to throw autumn leaves in the air with a look of untainted delight on her face. It just felt comfortingly normal in its spectacular

beauty, simply available for anyone who wanted to notice it. And it was at this time the word 'mundane' resonated within. As Teresa of Avila (1610) says, "The Lord walks among the pots and pans". Since this time I have stopped to notice the ordinary, the mundane in my little world; the bird who sings all over the house in the thick of winter, the flowers courageously blooming amidst the covering of frost, the trees quietly standing their ground, walking home from school with my children, feeling the warmth of the fire.

Transcendent/Immanent

There is a certain balance we all hold between the transcendent and the immanent, to varying degrees at different moments throughout our life, and Ralph Metzner (1980) and Larry Decker (1993) have helped bring clarity to my understanding of this. Decker discusses spirituality in the context of our spiritual development and the impact trauma has on this. The real immanence of trauma in the moment of the trauma, or the lasting effects of the trauma experienced either explicitly or implicitly, bring us into the immediacy of our everyday existence, into the very real lived-experience of the suffering of ourselves within a suffering world. The contrast to this is the transcendent experience, one which takes us beyond the limitedness of our self and our experiences. Perhaps the degree of the real or perceived immanent experience within and surrounding ourselves impacts on our openness to the transcendent. And this is what I wondered about; whether when we are more entwined within our super-egoic parts we are less open to O and, conversely, when we are in an experience conducive to the flow of O we are less heavily bound by the experiences and limitations of our superego.

A space where I can experience the harmonious relationship between immanent and transcendent is that of mutually desired sex. This is a space where union with another can meld the very embodied aspects of the physical pleasures of good sex with the more transcendent experiences within these moments. Often as one gets closer to orgasmic ecstasy the passionate calling of the name of the lover turns into that of calling the name of God or other deities. Do we become God to each other in those moments or are we in fact making love with God as well as each other? The lines, boundaries and certainties of where we begin and end are blurred, and the spaces between us and the universe are open, expansive, sacred, transcendent, while being simultaneously precise, potent, deeply intimate and profoundly immanent.

*The erotic and mystical are no strangers: each is a tempest; each
drowns the individual in the yearn and success of combination; each
calls us forth from an ordinary life to a new measure.*

(Mary Oliver, 2016, p. 105)

In my previous nursing work, I also experienced the seamless holding of the immanent and transcendent when supporting children who were dying, with death being imminent, and their families, through the palliative phase. Each situation is so different from another, but there seems to be an atmosphere in each family, in each home, where there is no place for the superego, and the concerns that usually demand our attention dissipate into this uncertain and deeply sad, but holy space. I observe these precious ones as having a sense of one foot on earth, in the physical, in immanence (often with the experiencing of pain, or other bodily needs, as well as the pleasure of touch and closeness with loved ones) and the other foot in eternity, at *one* with transcendence. This atmosphere feels palpable to all who enter it, a sacred space where we speak with hushed tones and tread lightly, where the little one that is leaving our world is revered with utmost respect, honouring the sanctity of the transcendent being so alive amidst the imminence of dying.

It is expressed well in the words of James Finlay (as cited in Rohr, 2018), drawing from the insights of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross:

Those who come to acceptance in death have about them a certain transparent childlike quality, an uncanny peace. It's a peace not of this world. For in accepting their seemingly unacceptable situation, they are transformed in ways that leave us feeling strangely touched and privileged to be in their presence. Being in their presence can open up in us a deep sense of how invincibly precious we are in the midst of our fragility... it just might be possible that when the moment of our death finally comes, nothing will happen. For in some deep, unexplainable way we will have already crossed over into the deathless love of God.

Perhaps this speaks of the ultimate and final openness to the transcendent, that of in death. When I think about death I imagine being released from the burden of an ego, and no longer exposed to the pressures and expectations of the superego.

*So shalt though feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.*

(William Shakespeare, 1609, Sonnet 146)

Part of psychotherapy is an increasing awareness and acceptance of my dying parts, perhaps transforming the existence or depressive lure of dying into an experience of coming to life. In thinking about death, I cannot overlook the treacherous situations of abrupt death, when death comes like a thief in the night to viciously snatch our loved ones away. I think of those in my life who have taken their own lives and I feel the jarring nature of hearing the news,

the discombobulated experience of trying to digest this new reality, the myriad of feelings and responses, and the attempt at acceptance of this kind of death, as well as the deaths that seem to have no 'dying' piece to them. There seems no discourse for making sense of this, and there seems great difficulty in capturing the numinous amidst such events.

It's easy to forge that our own dying can be an opportunity for awakening. If we accept that we are more than the body, then that which remains beyond the physical form is embarking on the most momentous spiritual adventure of all.

(Miribai Starr, 2019, p. 213)

THE embodied FEMiNINE



The truck pulling up
Loud and intruding as the men step out
Chainsaws revving as the testosterone builds
louder louder
stronger stronger
My gut stirring inside as my mind imagines their next move
Cut
Saw
Crash
Cut
Saw
Crash
Loud, Repetitive
Where is this happening?
It feels so close, too close
Inside my house
Inside my heart
I open the blind to see the last branch falling
Of the precious ecosystem I have grown to love and feel one with
My heart bursts
And groans escape my mouth
No
No
No
It is gone
A part of me has died with it

In my early understandings God was always masculine for me, a reflection of the patriarchal culture Christianity has been immersed in, particularly in Protestant circles. The triune: God the Father, Jesus the son, and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we dared to think of the Holy Spirit in a feminine light, but only momentarily. My worldview of God was strongly masculine. It has taken a lot of concerted effort to conceptualise God as feminine, and it can still feel awkward to use the 'she' or 'her' or 'it' or 'they' pronoun. I do believe there is something very significant about the fact that I am a woman writing this dissertation. There is something inherently ripe about the timing of this in my life, at this developmental stage of my journey, in this nation, and at this point in time.

On reflecting on the year and on my escape into television and the movies I have been watching, I notice that they are heavily dominated by women, which was not intentional. And I wonder, without my knowing it, if I have had a need to be influenced by the feminine, in all its varieties and forms. I am drawn to the female mystics of old and those more contemporary, and it excites me! A different part of my soul, a part that has been impoverished and empty, is starting to wake up and be nourished and enlivened through a growing awareness of the inherent strength and vitality, wisdom and potency of being a woman.

My capacity for growth is not currently determined by my ability to intellectually recall, which might typically be associated with the masculine, academia, or the superego, but instead by my openness to embody and integrate my new realities, which feels somewhat more feminine, more spiritual, mystical. I suspect that these realities may be individually known but are more likely collectively felt.

Mirabai Starr (2019) writes so eloquently, captivatingly arousing the feminine within us. She identifies that we have often associated spirituality as rising above the human condition, and in so doing, setting mind against body and elevating abstraction over engagement. With *whakama* I acknowledge my own desire for this as evidenced by the title of this paper: 'Transcending the superego'. Instead Starr challenges us to consciously embody spirituality, and she highlights that the feminine is all about incarnation and embodiment within the blessing of the ordinary. I am moved to tears as she portrays the feminine mystic Teresa of Avila (from the 16th century) and her experience of her heart being "filled and flooded [through an encounter with the countenance of Christ] releasing her from her exile in the religious desert and catapulting her into the garden of mystical connection" (p. 20). Teresa wanted everyone, especially women, to experience the "direct connection with the Divine inside the sanctuary of their own souls" (p. 20). Starr encourages us to live "a passionately engaged life in which the lines between immanence and transcendence disappear and contemplation and action are inseparable" (p. 23).

MyStical

Mirabai Starr (2019) poetically calls us forth into an experience of the contemplative life that is understood from the heritage of our ancestors in the current context of the universe.

Contemplative life is a tapestry of intention and surrender, of reaching out and letting go, of stillness and exhilaration, form and formlessness. It is devotional and nondual. It is grounded in our connection with the Earth and our interconnectedness with all beings. And it is about moments of rapture in the face of the most ordinary phenomena, in which our particular embodied experience gives way to an undifferentiated melding with All That Is. This is the dance of masculine and feminine, which call each other from the core of our soul DNA, demanding reunification and wholeness.

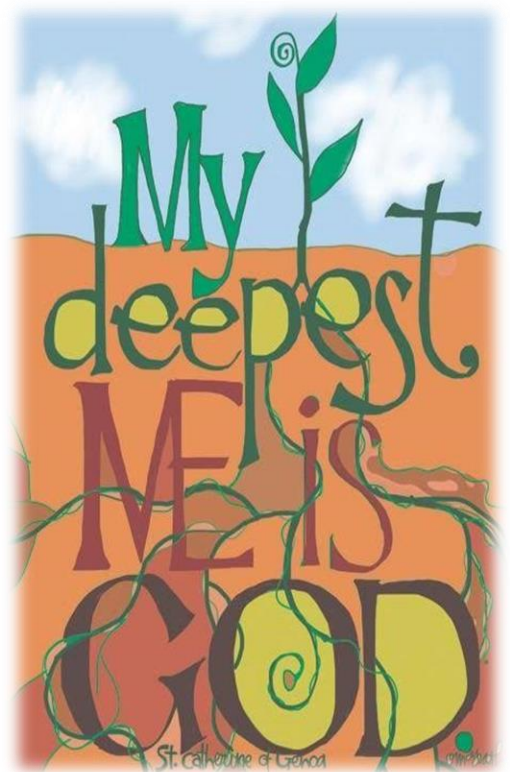
(p. 25).

And that has been the endeavour of this dissertation; the hope and desire that individually and collectively we will continue to attain increasing levels of integration and wholeness, love and unity.

Learning to stay present, presuming nothing and allowing not knowing space, opens up inner space from within us, and we see that our self constructs, our beliefs, our opinions; all of that really is nothing and the mystery itself is everything.

(Miranda Macpherson, 2018)

This statement, “My deepest me is God” (Catherine Of Genoa, 1447-1510), has become quite a contemplative chant for me and one that is mystical while simultaneously resonating deep within me. It speaks to me of our interconnectedness with both the divine and with each other. If we are all a reflection of God and if our deepest self, perhaps our truest self, is in fact God, then there is little to differentiate between you and me. As I wrote in my journal in July: *If I don't believe in God anymore, then essentially, I don't believe in me. My deepest me is God, therefore I am God, therefore there is God as much as there is you and there is me.*



Whether we want to call it God or the Divine or O or transcendent or anything else we have attributed to our God-understanding, is somewhat irrelevant. What matters to me is that I am as much a something, as much as there is an anything. That as much as at times I want to not believe in the Divine, I am then confronted with my own reality. If I deny divinity, I ultimately deny a me.

The important thing is to love much

My choice of Saint Teresa of Avila's quote to portray my topic in a succinct abstract for my dissertation presentation was one that arose rather spontaneously and without much thought. Teresa said, "*The important thing is not to think much, but to love much, and so to do whatever best awakens you to love*" (1515-1582). This was rather a provocative choice of words to invite curiosity and mystery into what can be a rather intellectually and academically driven piece of prose in University circles. I questioned whether this was wise as, while I love this quote it also is limited. I do believe in the importance of thinking. As Reiner (2009) outlines, having an increasing capacity to think alongside our primitive and previously repressed feelings enables the maturing birth of a mind and development of a useful conscience. I wonder if Teresa's words perhaps align with Bion's belief that thoughts coming from the mind are false, as they do not evolve from O or absolute truth (as cited in Reiner, 2009).

These concepts are difficult to express and write about as they fail to be cohesively coherent to our intellect, to our mind, and therefore it can be easy to dismiss them or invalidate them. But perhaps this is just a reflection of our society's tendency to idealise the mind, science, hard-data or, dare-we-say, 'facts'. Maybe our reluctance to see the world through mystical eyes, through the body or from the earth, is because it can be so abstract, so difficult to define succinctly; it is messy and muddy and catastrophically fierce and breathtakingly beautiful.

Teresa's invitation to awaken to love, is quite ingenious I think, as it can be so broad and so deep, so simple and so complex, so personal and so collective. It encompasses Reiner's (2009) theory of deep introspection with a thinking other that is interpersonally drawn from the sources of O, allows room for Washburn's (1995) regression in the service of transference; it resurrects the outcast feminine, bringing her back to her rightful, embodied, sacred space, creating room for all of life in all of its forms.

FINAL MUSINGS

I am okay

As I face the end phase of my heuristic process, the unpredictability and uncertainty of life throws an ominous curveball in my direction that slaps me in the face, throwing me off my perch, and leaving me feeling trapped in a lonely and isolated battle amidst the superego and transcendence. I seem to be thrown from being ferociously angry and disturbed, splitting and rejecting, to being soft, kind, caring and worried. The vileness and intensity of repulsion and aggression that occasionally erupts from within feels alien to who I thought myself to be. Just as surprisingly, my capacity for care, for kindness, for belief and for forgiveness, while not unfamiliar, feels dependable and more trustworthy than ever before. It seems unjustly and white-knucklingly abhorrent that the enormity of the superego and spirituality come to such violent and intense loggerheads at this particular time, and in this particular way. It leaves me questioning God and ferociously imploring the universe, as the judges within and without shake the foundations of all that seems secure and dear to me and threaten its destruction.

When my head is clearer and my paranoia less overt I notice the shame and terror that once kept me hidden has less of a hold, while also acknowledging that the fear of other's judgements hovers in the shadows, but only if I bother to pay it attention. The security that a sense of God once gave me, now seems as faint as the thread of a silkworm blowing in the breeze. I feel angry and exasperated with God and the universe. I feel like I have been fooled into believing in something that seems so callously cruel, and I play with the idea of renouncing my faith, tempted to reject it as it seems to have rejected me.

Yet moments later, as I walk to my newly found favourite tree and feel its fortitude and there-ness, God seems large and everywhere. To pray seems somewhat redundant, yet not to pray feels superstitiously neglectful, so I simply be present with my world, with my trusted friends the trees, with the wind, with the water, with the earth. Honouring the reality that life is so much bigger than me, than what I can control, than this piece of my journey, feels scary, and yet what else can I do? And I am reminded, once again, that the messiness of life that throws us into states of uncertainty, paranoia and fear, is also the same life in which we survive, and survive, again, and again. And my newly-discovered truth of 'I am okay' and 'I will always be okay' trickles down from my head to my heart, from my breath to my bloodstream, from the hairs on my skin to my gutsy organs within, solidifying the ever-expanding awareness of my okay-ness.

Expectation versus desire

My topic, my method and my approach have always felt like a selfish endeavour. I have done this for me, and I realise as I near the end of this work that I remain in that same position: that of its deep interest for me, and the meaning I have personally gained

throughout this process. Attending to the requirement of how this inquiry impacts on theory, research, practice and training, and the articulation of this, seems to threaten to diminish its raw beauty, to clumsily plonk meaning onto something outside of myself. I do believe the Auckland University of Technology Psychotherapy programme would benefit from more explicit attention to spirituality in its curriculum. Although I would equally argue that psychotherapy is one of the few professions that in its truest essence and the purest nature of its style of work, *is* implicitly spiritual. Promoting conversations that allow us to talk about the superego rather than talk-us-out of talking about the superego would help us in our development of working with others. The world of research would be enhanced by more attention to the bringing together of our understanding of the two components of spirituality and the superego with people, clients and in psychotherapy. And yes, this research contributes to practise: the more we can understand the complexities of the superego and how this is often expressed through spirituality is undoubtedly pertinent to our expanding awareness of our clinical understanding and application. But all those things, to me anyway, are obvious, and seem somewhat superfluous and demeaning to this dissertation. And I wrestle again with expectation versus desire, once again a conflict between the superego pressures of academic requirements versus the spiritual seduction to simply be with what is. And I notice I continue to attempt both, perhaps too afraid of letting one of the teams down, so endeavouring to honour them both.

The opportunity to be honest with myself throughout this process has been challenging and humbling, at times invigoratingly wonderful and at other times laboriously unpleasant. When I stayed true to myself and my own internal exploration of this topic, I felt like I honoured the purity of the heuristic methodology, staying self-focused. When I let the institutional superego join forces with my own superego, I felt I lured away from true heuristics. To accommodate both these requirements, that of the academic learning outcomes as well as the self-searching heuristic inquiry, has been a challenge. At the end of the day the question which measures a phenomenological study is: did I discover meaning? And I believe that yes, I did.

After my initial thoughts that there was little theory on the topic of superego and spirituality, I have discovered over this journey, that the opposite is true; there is plenty! What I believe I have added to the current literature is a personal discovery of this relationship, a revealing and honest unravelling of my own process. While the literature is quick to use clients to demonstrate this, the theorists are perhaps less inclined to reveal their own inner workings, their own vulnerabilities, struggles and uncertainties. And this is what I believe I have brought by unravelling parts of my own story and experiences throughout this journey. I also believe I have added a colourful and creative blend of the mystical and poetic with the personal, as well as with the academic and theoretical. This I believe is what psychotherapy needs: a varied, colourful, emerging and diverse synthesis of the complex, difficult, disturbing superego, along with the simple yet brilliant, beautiful and unpredictable components of spirituality.

Awakening

Jesus is recorded in the Bible as saying, “You must be ground like wheat, and once you have recovered, then you can turn and help the brothers” (Luke 22:31-32, Free translation). This feels an apt description of my psychotherapy training and my own ‘catch-up’ developmental journey over recent years, along with the expansion of this throughout this heuristic journey. It aligns for me to what the theorists I have discussed have outlined regarding the unravelling process of transformation. In order to be transformed we must first be ground and regressed and do the hard work of reflection, introspection and illumination to bring to life the ‘true self’ that lies within us. Through the transitional space in the process of reparation, we can move from omnipotent control to an acceptance of reality. I think, in part, this is the letting-go that our spiritual leaders teach us, along with an engaging-with, exploring and understanding of all our parts, that can hopefully bring us to a more cohesive whole, both within us and between us. Wordsworth (1807) articulated that “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting”, and I add to this: that our life’s journey is, therefore, an awakening and a remembering.

Embodiment

The very nature of my topic of exploring both the mind and spirit within my personal story, thus evoking emotion, situated this topic rather perfectly within the heuristic research paradigm. What was unexpected during my research was a growing awareness of, relationship with, and integration of, our physical environment, in terms of my own body and the physicality of my relationship with others and with the world. What I initially perceived as a rather intellectual and transcendent topic unexpectedly grew into a much more embodied experience.

I have spent much of my life looking up to the sky or out to the ocean or over the mountain ranges and valleys to discern and connect with the Divine. What I have discovered through this journey is that there is just as much beauty, diversity, richness and life in the dirt, in the earth, in the barrenness of the land. I have learnt the beauty in looking down as well as up, being fully in the immanent and well as the transcendent. If I could submit this dissertation in physical form it would be simply a handful of dirt.

Rhythm

What seems to have been a consistent flow of this dissertation is that of things coming to life, and then of things having a death. Of insight, new thoughts, energy and inspiration. To dearth, vacant spaces, nothingness, barren desserts, desolate intrapsychic holes that feel like they have no end. There has been a flow between these states throughout this process and it seems to reflect the nature of the topic: from the jarring, oxygen- and life-depriving stance of the superego to the life-enriching, spaciousness, peacefulness and tranquillity of spirituality.

My experience throughout this journey suggests that somehow the superego and spirituality, perhaps even rather mysteriously, coexist in their dichotomy all the time, every day. Attempting to abolish or to transcend the superego, even perhaps through the medium of spirituality, is not what I have discovered. In fact, what I have found is that it is in the simple acceptance of the rhythms of both the complexities and, equally, the simplicities of life, is where I find my richest life. There is rhythm in this flow, like the tide, sometimes bringing life, sometimes death, sometimes constructing, sometimes destructing, coming in, going out, bringing reassurance in its repetitive predictability.

Ordinary

To have some space for creative synthesis I contemplated, planned for and eagerly anticipated a few days away; somewhere serene, peaceful, thought provoking and inspiring, most likely based in the thick of nature. But as the day drew near, yet again my plans were abruptly, annoyingly, and yet not surprisingly, spearheaded by the realities of life. And I found myself constrained once again, by the ordinariness of my world, from which there seems no escape. Instead of being immersed in the middle of the bush, farmland, or by the sea, I instead look out to my little garden, which I feel privileged to have. I am reminded of the love and care family and friends invested into this garden to celebrate my fortieth, and the life now looking at me speaks of their presence and challenges me that just maybe I am not as alone as my harsh internal world threatens me to believe. This little garden houses some brave plants trying to sustain life amidst the weeds that seem more plentiful than the rest, and I hear the blackbird singing, not for any reason other than that she/he can, and I am struck again by the plain old theme that has been present throughout this assignment: that of the beauty, stability, pervasiveness and even comfort in that which is mundane, every day and ordinary. I love my crazy little garden despite how unkempt and uncared for it currently is. It greets me with the predictable familiarity of there-ness, and it calls for nothing from me. And this is where I feel my journey of exploration of spirituality has taken me at the conclusion of this dissertation; that it is the ordinary in which our lives exist and in which we find peace and reprieve from the threatening, loud and irritating superego. I have found I do not need a fancy retreat, a life-altering epiphany, an experience with the supernatural, not even to be in majestic scenery. I simply need to be present with what is around me, and it is here that my superego quietens, and it is here that the universe in all its complexity settles and finds harmony, peace and ease.

I finish with this karakia and, while it is usually an opening karakia, it feels appropriate to close with it, as it is an invitation for thought, for reflection, for the beginning of something new. Kia maia.

Korihi te manu
Taakiri mai i te ata
Ka ao, Ka ao, Ka awatea
Tihei mauri ora

*The bird sings
The morning has dawned
The day has broken
Behold there is life*

ReFeReNce LiSt

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