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Exploring Women's Spirituality

By Revd Gayanne Frater

Is there such a thing as women's spirituality?

After being made redundant from the position of Vicar of a multi-centred parish in 2007, I found myself studying – again! I returned to university study in response to Bishop Richard Randerson who encouraged me to see my experience of clergy redundancy as an opportunity to explore how God might want me to priest in the future. While that particular exploration is still a work in progress, going back to university enabled me to explore more deeply current understandings of identity, spirituality, cross-cultural engagement, personal and community resilience, and grief, loss and bereavement. My studies culminated in completing a research project that explored the question: In what ways does women's spirituality, reflected in their metaphors of hope, support them during times of significant identity transition? I was curious to see how women experiencing significant identity transition experience their spirituality. I also wondered what spirituality might look like through the eyes of women.

The three women, Cara, Ana and Witty (not their real names) all worked in a variety of caring professions (nursing, pastoral ministry, counselling, supervision, or spiritual direction). They were invited to participate in a research conversation where they could share their story of identity transition, spirituality and hope around three self-selected metaphors of hope which they would bring to the conversation. The metaphors of hope represented the beginning, middle and end of their identity transition which spanned from between five and twenty years, with one woman stating she was still in a period of identity transition. The women were aged from mid-thirties to early fifties and were all mothers and of identified with a variety of cultures including, Maori, Cook Island Maori, Pākeha, Irish, and Fijian.

Cara, a new single widow, described herself as



'spiritual but not religious' Her identity transition was triggered by the unexpected illness, rapid decline and subsequent death three weeks later of her husband of fifteen years. Ana sits in the Catholic tradition and described her spirituality as being strong, well developed, tested by life and death, transforming and still growing. Her identity transition was triggered by the 'deathly illness of her middle child. Witty described herself as *inter-faith – God in all and all in God*. Her identity transition was triggered by a cluster of events involving various kinds of abuse within church and communities, and mortal and non-mortal losses.

I want to acknowledge that while I speak about women's spirituality it is probably more accurate to speak of women's spiritualities as it captures the multiplicity of women's lived experiences. Every woman's context is both dynamic and complex so any attempt to generalise or speak of commonality will be greeted with a "yes-but". However sometimes focussing on the differences between us means we are unable to meet on the common ground between us and voices are marginalised or silenced. This work was tentative, exploratory discussion, and is incomplete. I was not so much interested in defining women's spirituality as creating a patchwork that described

what women's spirituality might look like in Aotearoa New Zealand. Rovers & Kochum (2010) note the current trend for people to "patchwork their spirituality together like a patchwork quilt, a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks to find their way" (p.20). The genius of patchwork is that while it deals primarily with geometric forms which may appear to be rigid and limiting on their own, pieced together the finished work is often a creative, fluid and dynamic piece of art.

The deep and rich conversations demonstrated that these women expressed spirituality as:

- ◇ being deeply connected and relational
- ◇ an embodied authentic knowing
- ◇ both /and not either/or
- ◇ embracing mystery and unknowing
- ◇ located in ordinary life
- ◇ going where they hadn't gone before
- ◇ Choosing life
- ◇ linked to creativity
- ◇ a generous spaciousness.

Deeply relational and connected

Cara, Ana and Witty experienced a deep sense of connectedness with 'God' however they perceived God to be, with others (the living and the dead), creatures, and creation, goddesses, spirit guides, angels, and ancestors.

We decided that we needed to stay together on it, that we needed to be really strong – and that's why I've brought this – [statue] because it's really strong, and it's very joined, and we needed to stay focussed on each other and our kids throughout it. So there's no break in it you see, that's why I like it. You know, it's like God because it's complete, complete, it's not broken anywhere.

Yeah, it sits in front of my mirror, so I see it every day, right in front of the mirror. It's been with me for over nineteen years. And it's solidarity. I think it's our commitment to ourselves, to God, and to our kids. That no matter what happens – as long as we're open, and able to trust, and commit, be committed to one another, everything else can go berserk around us, and we can lose everything.

So this, and it's quite cold to hold, which is actually refreshing, you know. It's beautiful and continues to stun me with its beauty. I see it every day, if not two or three times a day. And I often just, you know, just touch it, use it as a kind of karakia, prayer and with my son away and my daughter boarding, it's even

more important, a way of them being present to me while being away.

At the time of her husband's death, Cara had the following dream.



I had a, sort of like a dream that an angel embraced me. And I felt cocooned. And I could actually feel the feather down... everything about it felt so real. I suppose that's what those wings represent. And I was given those wings by a girlfriend way before the event occurred. But I had them put away coz I couldn't find them. I did everything I could to find it. I tore the house apart to get it. Because it really all of a sudden meant so much. And yeah, I think with the dream it was, I could get a sense of even the colour, like of who the angel was. That's why I was quite drawn, like I had a sense of Archangel Michael. And I had a sense that his wings were actually chocolate brown. So there was that intense [feeling] and a sense of knowing who he was and I think at that particular time it was that he gave me that time off. That night that I felt that embrace I was actually given the night off. Like everything, my history of burdens, the life that I've had up to that point was almost stripped away and I felt just peace. But a very serene kind of peace and just absolute love. And that's how I woke up, feeling very light and – and loved yeah. And then within minutes it was all back, the hurt and everything. The reality of my life kicked in when I woke up.

Yeah, I don't know. So that gave me hope. It was the first sign, for me it probably means the hope of being on the right path, hope, or should I say courage. Courage probably fits it better. The courage in knowing that I'm supported. Yeah, through my trials I suppose ... and knowing that there's more to this life [than what is now] So, I'd actually never knew of Psalms, the Bible Psalms, that part of the Bible. I'd actually never read it ... with the gift that my girlfriend gave me with those wings, there was a little message, Psalms 91 Right and it just confirmed, it just confirmed the dream and everything that I felt.

Embodied authentic knowing

Midlife women's spirituality is authentic to women's ways of knowing which includes embodied knowledge, intuition, subjective knowledge, connection with the Divine/transcendent, tacit knowledge, felt sense, noetic experience, mystical, and enlight-

ened knowing (Ballou, 1995). All ways of knowing have both limitations and strengths. Transrational knowledge resists the tendency to prefer one kind of knowing over another, avoids harmful dualisms, and was expressed in the women's stories as an intuitive, felt-sense, embodied kind of knowledge grounded in an internal locus of authority. Messages of hope and support come in different ways – prayer, conversations with others, angles, spirits, the dead, waking and sleeping dreams, out of body experiences, a 'thought' popping up from nowhere, and through the help of counsellor, friend, or spiritual director.

Our son was dying. So that was the trigger basically that put me into like a spiritual emergency, spiritual crisis really. And I experienced what I came to know later, [the] dark night of the soul. But at that time I had no words for it, and that was a really hard thing, not being able to admit the words, not knowing the words.



So it kind of represents how it felt my life was really, and that includes my spirituality as well, so my mind, my body, and my spirit my emotions, the whole lot really, like my life, my world had actually shattered

So the black and white tiles ... they're smashedthey're broken bits basically, and you know some of the broken bits are tiny, and they actually can't be put back together. And some of the bigger bits ... they can be reassembled, but somehow, they just don't feel right. They could fit together, but it actually, it's not what they're meant to do, they're not meant to go back together, they're not meant to be joined again. You know, like, no don't put them back together and get the glue out to stick them, no, because that's not what's meant to be for me, not for me.... I had a strong sense within me, so again intuition, that that was not what was not meant to be, was not the best thing. I could make it happen if I wanted to, but it actually didn't seem right, it didn't seem right, and so it was highly intuitive.

So I guess when my world felt like it had been tipped upside down and shattered, there was that little sense within me, that somehow this was related to what the words had been that morning when I was driving home from work years earlier. So that part of me actually ... in a kind of way comforted me. Kind of like it's just saying it's gonna be okay, but that was a very, very tiny piece (pointing to a tiny shard of tile).

Both/and not either/or

The women spoke about resisting dualistic thinking and living which they found unhelpful and damaging. They viewed the whole of life, past, present and future as being one of essential

unity. Their sense of oneness was encompassed 'God', people, all creatures, and creation itself.

God in all and all in God, that's how I define my spirituality. I asked God just recently, you know, I was thinking about God and everything, and everything God, and I said well how do you walk on the grass? If you're in everything Lord, how do you walk on the grass? You know what came back? Sacredly. And that's my spirituality. To walk sacredly, to be sacred, to treat each person, [as sacred] somehow. And I don't do it easily every day. Some days I feel more capable of doing that, and other days I think, oh, boy – Witty

Mystery and unknowing embraced.

Accepting uncertainty, ambiguity, unknowing and living as trustfully as possible dominated the stories of grief, loss and devastation. 'Fixing it' was no longer essential and living into the questions became the new norm. They spoke of how long it took to make any sense or meaning out of what had happened.

When I was going through the transition something that was very, very helpful for me, was the Cloud of Unknowing and still is ... that place of unknowing within myself, and my life, and the world that I'm living in. So that process of unknowing, you know thinking I knew everything, maybe that's represented by the white, thinking I knew everything. And it's like no, you don't, you know it's like, and there are mysteries in life, you know. So, and so that unknowing is embracing the mysteries, yeah. (Ana)

Witty spoke of going into the cave (shed and the bottom of the garden where she learnt to paint, after she had a powerful encounter with God, she painted her Wisdom tree.



I felt like I was beyond love, I felt like I was beyond love of self, beyond love of God, beyond love of other people. Because my girlfriends, none of them realised I'd taken on board this incredible shame. And it is shame, it wasn't guilt, it was shame [for breaking a deeply held value].

Some Key Concepts

Carol Gilligan's 'voice' metaphor

Voice, for Gilligan, is what it means to be human. She writes, to have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard: is it an intentionally *relational* act ... by voice I mean something like the core of the self. Voice is *natural* and also *cultural*. It is composed of *breath*, sounds, words, rhythm and language. And voice is a powerful *psychological* instrument and channel, connecting inner and outer worlds. Speaking and listening are a form of psychic breathing.

Gilligan, 1993, p. xvi

Midlife

The time in life where women's caring shifts from 'care of others' (usually to the detriment of self) to care for others and self so that decisions around care also includes the needs of the carer.

Spirituality

While I chose not to define spirituality in my research project, if I had, then I would have used Christine Puchalski's definition, "Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred" (Vallaseñor, F. (2013). Spirit and breath are interchangeable in most languages. If we have breath, we have spirit, being spiritual is a human experience and is not limited to age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture or religion. We can expect expressions of spirituality to be as diverse and manifold as the peoples of the earth. The liveliness of spirit is not limited to human experience but is present throughout the universe and in all living things. It may, however, be named differently depending on one's spirituality—for example, spirit, source, the Divine, energy, wairua, God, Holy Spirit.

Identity transition

Identity transition is used to describe a period of time, usually of some length, when one's sense of identity is in the process of change. It's a time where the relatively cohesive 'who you were' no longer fits and the 'who you are becoming' is not yet clear enough to be named or lived into. Swartz & Kottler (2004, 60) describe it as "living a destabilised existence in the margins between two identities" and as being a time full of ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox, often accompanied by feeling so fragility, unfamiliarity, helplessness and disorientation. The process of reclaiming or gaining an authentic voice involves living through this marginal phase of existence. It is a common midlife experience for women, and is becoming more so for men.

Metaphors (Symbols) of hope

Before language, people told stories through images, pictures, and symbols. We made meaning out of what we could see and draw. At times of distress, trauma, unexpected change, words often fail us and we turn to the world of metaphor, symbol and image. Ancient and new symbols and metaphors allow us to give expression to the complexity of our experience and contexts which capture our imagination and which deepens our ability to trust in an unknowable but different future. Hope is the fundamental knowledge that there is a way out of the present difficulty, confusion, unknowing and is captured by the word 'yet', "what I hope for, I do not **yet** have or see" (Lynch, 1965, 243) and is forged in the cauldron of fear, courage and risk

Resources

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And my friends didn't know about my sister dying, because I didn't have the courage or the strength to ring them and tell them so I had no help in it, really. I had no companionship in it. I just withdrew into this incredible cave.

This painting, its meaning is, even in the darkest of times we are not beyond love, that's what that painting's all about. Even in the darkest of times we are not beyond love.

Ordinary life is the site of the extraordinary

A striking feature of each woman's spirituality was the way in which they each encountered the Divine in the very ordinary things of life. Messages of hope and support came through dreams, songs, conversations while driving home from work, hanging out the washing, making school lunches, looking after the kids, chasing an ambulance, painting the door stoop, skipping in the slums, having a cuppa with a friend, being in the bath, doing the ordinary things of life.

But I believe God gave me an out of body experience. I was sitting painting my back steps, and the kids were there, and I was painting away, and all of a sudden I went into this space. I was sitting on the edge of some cliffs and looking down, and God was beside me, and God asked, you know, "What do you think I would feel toward you, if you did, and you were a complete mess, you were broken up, and you were lots of pieces?" And I looked at Him and said, "I don't know, you tell me?" Yeah, probably not quite so jovial. And I felt God just look at me and say, "I wouldn't love you any less". Just, just that profoundness of love. And I said, "and if I don't, and I'm like I am now?" "I can't love you any less". And so we just poured through this ... It was incredibly real, incredibly real. And did some, just some other sorting out of things, like my mistake with the girls that night, and understanding I think at that stage, of shame a little bit more than I had... So I came out of that sort of spiritual experience, looked at my clock and it was literally two and a quarter hours or something later. And I looked at my kids and they'd been playing absolutely happily all that time. (Witty)

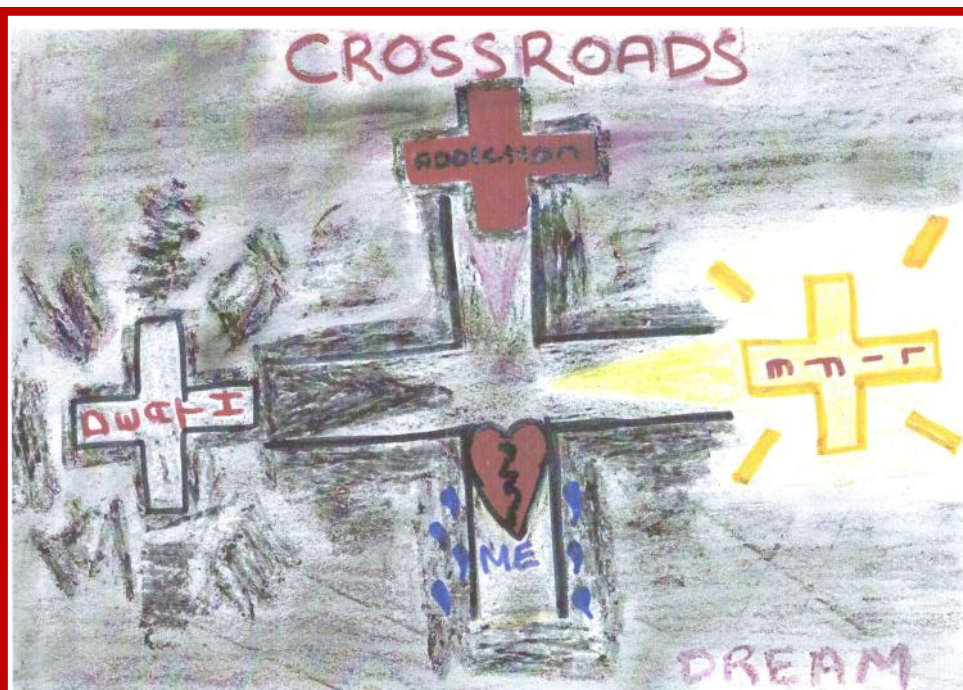
Going where they hadn't gone before

Each woman experienced 'going places they had not gone before', a stepping out into new territory. They spoke of focussing on 'what is', while always knowing there is more to 'what is' and what is known in anyone moment of time.

There are ways to connect. There are ways to connect to loved ones on the other side. And there are different ways of getting to them, not just via dreams. There's by via different realms. There's different, for me there's different ways in which to get in ... and it takes a lot of determination to connect together, however we can, you know. Because I suppose in the whole spectrum of it, it's not allowed.

In the whole spectrum of spirit, being in spirit world because I'm living there, you're not allowed to. But there are ways to connect. That's how I feel. So ultimately it's only –well you're not allowed but you're allowed to visit, you're just not allowed to stay. Yeah, coz I think God allows us, I mean obviously I feel that I've been allowed on more than one occasion. I've just been lucky to make those connections but, I cannot stay. It's almost like getting booted out again. You've still got your life to do. (Cara)

Ana found herself praying to Mary, something she never dreamed she would do and found her prayers becoming more contemplative. Witty spoke of reading the bible less and spiritual books more as she was drawn into embracing a wider and deeper understanding of God.



They also traversed unfamiliar emotional territory and spoke of needing to become comfortable about the anger they experienced. They needed to name it, accept it, befriend it, use it and become empowered by it. Their anger could be God-directed, self-director or other directed.

*the anger that arose in me, and that wasn't a familiar. I wasn't really a very angry person before that, but man, you know when they say that grief and loss can be experienced as anger sometimes, yeah I just really experienced anger a lot. So much so that some of my friends said to me, oh gee you've changed, we liked the old you, we don't like the new you (. *** you I said, in my mind of course. But then, you know so there's God (laughter) – Why the **** have you let this happen to me God? (laughter). I was really angry and, you know one night after work I was alone at home, and I think, for the first time in my life I really became very real with God ... So, you know half an hour of yelling and screaming at God, cursing, which I, you know had to ask for forgiveness for. But I think God and I actually got to be a lot better known to each other in that half hour. Much more real, and then when I emerged from that, it was this quiet voice that said to me why not you? I thought, 'I hadn't thought about that' (laughter) and then I began to realise yeah well who am I*

that I'm any different from anybody else? Who am I? Who do I think I am? Immune? Immune to the suffering and pain of life? I'm not, nobody is, because that's part of being a human being. (Ana)

Choosing Life – ancient wisdom

The wisdom of choosing life, literally and metaphorically, was a consistent theme across all three stories. Whether the call to choose life occurred through dreams, or prayer of a waking vision, each woman recounted a story or stories of having to choose life in the face of death. Choosing life required saying no: to the desire to end one's own life; to life-denying behaviours and to caring for others at the cost of caring for self. It also

meant saying yes to creating space to have 'time out' to grieve, re-create and be someone other than mum; yes to going into the "cave," and saying yes to creativity, caring for self and becoming more connected, all of which are encapsulated in Gilligan's metaphor of authentic voice.

I just remember having quite a dark dream. And I was standing at a crossroads, you know. It was that bad. And I had choices, yep. I was shown choices and it was so dark. But you could see the roads, you know, the crossroads yep. And I remember seeing one which was like the white cross at the end, and you know in front of me, addiction which is more about just existing without participating in life. I think when you're addicted to something you're not participating coz you chose to give up but you're still alive. But you're not participating –

you're just existing. So that was that path. I felt like I was just going to wait my life out and just numb out for the whole duration of the rest of my life. And I was gonna do that through drugs or drinking, being everything else but myself yeah. And that was the option that was there, that was really appealing for me because the pain was so much.

At that time, it was very, I mean appealing but at the same time my kids are down the, my kids were at the end, the light at the tunnel. They're at the tunnel where the light is.

At the other end of the crossroads it was death. No [this wasn't a more real option] coz my kids are so powerful, like the drawing, you know, the love for my kids is so powerful that it overweighs my husband ... at the end of the day I used to say to him I love my children more than you. Yeah, and he's like good, that's how it should be.

And I'm not a quitter, so I can't go to the direction of that addiction, or just existing. Because I'm not, I'm not a quitter. I like to participate in life. I like to discover – I don't give up, as appealing as it is, it's not who I am.

Choosing life is hard work! It's just like oh my God it's so hard to live, to choose life and to participate and to learn and to get

back up. It's just that I'm so tired. That death or the other one would have been so much easier at the time. But I don't think like that anymore.

Yeah, I knew that getting there would be the hard work and stuff. But at the end of the day my children, it was more like they needed me, and their need gave me meaning (Cara).

Creativity linked to spirituality

Midlife is a time where priorities are reassessed, and expressions of creativity are retrieved from a bygone era or explored for the first time. The two older women, when their children become young adults both explored different expressions of creativity. Ana began to work with making pottery and doing mosaics and Witty undertook a painting course of study. Cara recognised that her priority was raising her children and her studies but looked forward to a time in the future where she would be able to be more creative.

so towards the last stages of transition creativity bubbled up ... There are a number of things that stand out really strongly for me about it ... it's in the shape of a cross, and I think for me there are many symbolic representations there, it's the pain and suffering of life. It is the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross for us.

There are a number of things that stand out really strongly for me about it ... it's in the shape of a cross, and I think for me there are many symbolic representations there, it's the pain and suffering of life. It is the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross for us.

Crossroads, a symbol of transition, and what I've come to realise is transitions, there are times when there are significant transitions in our life. However, every moment of our breathing life we are transitioning (laughter). Transition is the hope of life in a way...

So it represents something of beauty, what actually can come out of something that's fairly ugly, you know. So in there is gold ... [which] was actually once a very beautiful China plate ... a whole plate, but it got damaged, and the person who had it didn't want it anymore, because it was damaged. It wasn't, in their eyes ... beautiful anymore, so I think I've taken something that was damaged, and actually made it into something beautiful....It's kind of acknowledging that the gold is part of life as well that within ugliness is gold, yeah. (Ana)

Generous spaciousness

The women all spoke of how their own journey informed their

professional practice and their willingness to use that which had sustained them in the service of others. They spoke of experiencing God as being oriented to saying yes and being more permission giving, and this understanding of God was reflected in their own work. They each spoke of the way their spirituality



had deepened and broadened during their time of identity transition.

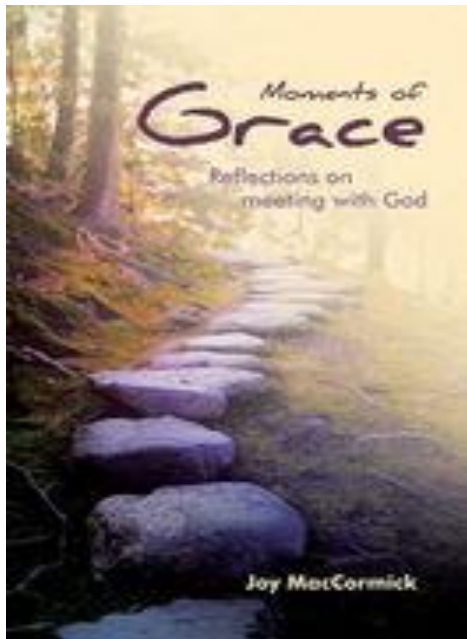
I think I learnt the value of really good listening, it's like a gift, and I like to give it away as much as I can. (Ana)

I think that I've got the strength to uphold other people, I can carry other people in their vulnerable states... No matter what deeper issues they may have, I actually don't have the right to own it and to take it on board. Because and I, you know, I must admit I do view us all as souls and so that's that soul's lesson, not mine (Cara)

I am able to pass this on in my work, coz I've done it (Witty)

Using metaphor, symbol and storytelling to speak about spirituality.

The variety of symbols chosen or created to share stories of identity transition and hope revealed the uniqueness of each woman. Symbols included glass angels, angel wings, paintings representing messages from God, crystals, precious stones, ordinary tiles, a cross necklace, a photo, shattered tiles, a video, a mosaic cross, a bible, songs, coloured stones and statues of a family group, a monk and an American Indian. Symbols were found; discovered; emerged as the result of prayer, dreams and waking dreams; were re-found and invested with deeper meanings; were created by the women; and at times "called" a woman to buy it. All the symbols functioned as visible and tangible expressions of hope which were gazed upon, watched, touched, and held, often becoming a centre point for prayer. All served as



Moments of Grace

Reflections on Meeting with God

Written by Joy Mac Cormick

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a reminder that the women were not alone. While each symbol held specific meanings, the women expected new meanings to continue to emerge, making the symbol of hope dynamic and fluid.

Hope emerged from within the women's spirituality, was congruent with the spirituality they each espoused and gave them courage to continue when old maps, beliefs and practices no longer fitted the landscape they found themselves in. For these women, hope was inextricably linked to their spirituality and their struggle to make sense and gain meaning of grief and loss experiences. Cave, tomb and womb-like dreams and visions were precursors to regeneration, new birth, creativity and resurrection.

While each story involved grief and loss, there was a surprising amount of laughter throughout the conversations. I believe this happened for two reasons. Firstly, each woman spoke of intentionally cultivating a sense of humour during their identity transition which helped them to take things more lightly and secondly, using metaphors of hope as the focus of the conversation enabled them to speak about their grief and loss in a way that was safe and strengthening for them.

All the women placed enormous significance upon the way in which their spirituality supported them during their identity transition. They spoke of the way it strengthened, comforted, reassured, confirmed, guided and encouraged them. It gave them hope and courage.

Three months after the research conversations the women were invited to reflect upon the experience of sharing their story. They all spoke of the gift it had been and the way it had strengthened and empowered them in their journey. Each conversation took about two hours – longer than usually given in most therapeutic settings. It's a rare gift to offer a safe and uninterrupted space for women to share their story of identity transition, hope, and spirituality but it is incredibly beneficial and empowering for them to do so. As the one listening, it was an awesome privilege to bear witness to their struggle, courage,

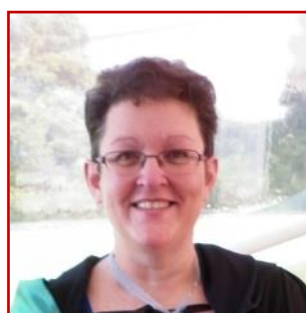
hope, vulnerability, strength and joy. This article offers an eagle's eye view of what these women's spirituality look like. I wonder in what ways it might resonate with other women and the work we are engaged in.

A Closing Prayer:

*Let us light a candle to honour women,
those who gave us birth,
those whose hands have clasped ours
and enabled us to be who we are today,
those whom we have supported in the past,
are supporting today and will do in the future.
And all those who share their stories with us.
We honour their honesty, courage and wisdom and our own.
In the name of our God who is Love,
Wisdom and Grace. Amen.*

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The Centre for Anglican Women's Studies, commonly known as the **Women's Studies Centre** was set up to serve and to advance the interests and needs of the women of this Church particularly those undertaking Theological training.

The Link Representatives from each Diocese and Hui Amorangi have been chosen for their leadership ability to identify, gather, facilitate, resource and encourage women in their educational preparation for ministry whether lay or ordained. It is hoped that the Women's Studies Centre can continue to enjoy the support of each Diocese and Hui Amorangi in this endeavour.

The issue of increasing numbers of women in representative positions across the councils and committees of the Church is seen as a high priority and the practice of intentional mentoring by those already in national and international representative roles is seen as a good way to expose women of this church to fulfill their potential as leaders.

Ensuring that women's voices and stories are heard now and in the future is also one of our continued aims whether it be by traditional methods of publication or using more contemporary technologies like website publication. We remain optimistic that through continued support, the needs of women throughout this Province will be valued and recognized.



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