This Inquiry and its Question

My mother: “When I was a child, your grandmother would become upset at the dinner table waiting for your grandfather to come home. I would get knots in my stomach watching her stew and fuss.” Where was the grace in those moments, so palpable during that morning’s hymn sing? Recently, I attended a meditation class with people who were lost in political turmoil and all of a sudden, for 20 minutes, a beautiful stillness fell over the group. Quiet. Gentle currents flowed through the room; a peace that surpassed understanding. Although holistic educators hope for this sustained calmness, edifying stillness is a rare occurrence.

In this chapter, I am proposing that spirituality and anxiety coexist together in the interconnected web that we wish could contain only beneficial experience. If spirituality is experienced as a fundamental connection to the cosmos, then it is possible that anxiety can be encountered while spiritual sensitivity is growing.

Anxiety, understood as the experience of fear while encountering life challenges, is not neatly contained within the closed self. Anxious energy floats through an atmosphere and escapes from the movements and words of the people we love. The realization of the coexistence between anxiety and spirituality emerged in a research inquiry that focused on developing a vital connection with nature through contemplative practices (Nigh, in press). The underlying assumption for the nature inquiry was that the body–mind awareness that was acquired by six former drama students (who later became participants) would naturally lead to a deeper relationship with nature. Short-term studies on mindfulness and nature based therapies show that stress is reduced and cognition refreshed after meditation and also after spending time in nature (Murphy, 1992; Williams, 2017). Then why were young female members of the participant group in this yearlong nature inquiry falling apart, encountering anxiety and depression throughout the inquiry year and after its conclusion?

Angela, one of the participants, described her experience of anxiety as we sat talking in a parked car. Dreams in Angela’s research journal showed that she was hiding in the basement while being chased by sexual predators. It was not my plan to make reference to Angela’s dreams for this present inquiry, until the night of a mass shooting. On that night, I also dreamt that I was trapped in a locked car. A predator was circling the vehicle and pounding on the windows. In the early morning hours, details of the previous night’s shooting unfolded in the news. The image I saw in that dream echoed two ways; in the direction of Angela’s dreams and towards the accounts of people who hid in their cars during that terrible evening. Later in the day, I understood one implication behind these dream images. If we
accept interconnectedness as a great invisible web, it is also true that anxiety resides within the collective field of consciousness and that it is not perhaps as easy as we think to stop it or disentangle from it.

Bob Kull (2009) lived in solitude for one year in the Patagonia wilderness. After experiencing degrees of anxiety upon his return, he wrote: “Nevertheless, although not aware of it at first, I fell into a depression” (p. 313). I was not aware of my own anxiety after years of deep attention in nature, neither was the depression that ensued expected after so many transcendent moments. As the nature study drew to a close, one of the phrases that I heard in meditation, was, “Follow experience”. During the seven years that have passed, my mother, young and elderly women alike, began to reveal stories of their anxieties. From spiritual women’s life experiences, I believed that no matter how deeply or profoundly spirituality is nurtured, anxiety is a part of our lived experience and it is time to be honest about it.

As early as ancient Egypt, women have been accused of being the anxious gender. Hippocrates first named anxiety, hysteria, claiming that the primary symptom was a “wandering uterus” from inadequate sex. Hysteria was the term for anxiety until Sigmund Freud developed his libido theory and later renamed it, anxiety (Tasca, Rapetti, Carta, & Fadda, 2012). In 2017, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that: “Depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide. More than 300 million people are now living with depression, an increase of more than 18% between 2005 and 2015” (WHO, 2017). Although I am not addressing depression directly, anxiety is the precursor to depression. The WHO has encouraged people across the globe to talk openly about their feelings.

Doing Phenomenological Research

How does a researcher follow a holistic inquiry that focuses on the coexistence of spirituality and anxiety in women’s lives? As a philosophical field of inquiry, phenomenology shares important concepts with holistic education; the pre-reflective body, unity, and relationship as primary to life experience. In Researching Lived Experience, Max van Manen (1997) explains that “we want to know that which is most essential to being” (p. 5). Edmund Husserl claimed that phenomenology involves the study of conscious experience and argued that consciousness “lifts up” dim moments from the pre-reflective body (van Manen, 2016).

Merleau-Ponty (2006) later refined the phenomenological discourse by grounding Husserl’s transcendental theorizing in the body’s experience. Ontological phenomenology focuses on being and shows how being is experienced in relation to an object or question. Through a situated presence in the pre-reflective body, it is possible to feel the currents of experience, for example, spatially, sensually, emotionally, and energetically. Sensations and feelings energize images, symbols, metaphors, and language. When we attend to an object or question, the phenomenon transforms us and, thus, in turn we transform it. Phenomenological research introduces unanticipated complexity, but Merleau-Ponty (2003) distills what it means to navigate through the web of existence:

The Nature within us must have some relation to Nature outside us, indeed Nature outside us must be revealed to us by the Nature that we are . . . By the nature in us, we can know Nature, and reciprocally it is from ourselves that living beings and even space speak to us . . . It is no longer a matter of constructing arguments, but of seeing how all this hangs together. (p. 206)

While observing how things hang together, it is necessary to see with feeling or with heart. With the intention to explain how it is possible to attend feelingly to lived experience, Darroch-Lozowski (2006) writes:

Where we place our attention and to what we choose to respond properly for the sake of felt resonance with what is before us is the beginning of an awareness of resonances that allow us to sort ourselves through the world more feelingly. (p. 3)
How objects and questions resonate and how they are connected within life’s matrix will call on the need to make meaning. Existential phenomenology “makes sense of what it means to ‘be (human), that is to say, what it means to live as an embodied being in a (particular) physical and social world” (van Manen, 1997, p. 118). Phenomenology, no matter whether the study begins with a surrender to being, or a desire to make meaning, forges its pathways always through lived experience.

Given to the practices of holism, I learn to trust images that appear in my consciousness. These arise during walks in nature, dreams, imaginal inquiries, or meditations (Romanyshyn, 2007). One night, an image appeared in my dreams, revealing an archetypal dynamic between two opposites; the masculine and the feminine. Jung believed that the self was an archetype that encompassed the personal unconscious and the ego (Jung, 1977). In the dream, a masculine figure (the ego) raised a feminine figure (the unconscious) far above his head as she reclined in a posture of pleasure. As the inquiry progressed, I believed that this research would evolve through the wisdom of the self. Heschel claims that wisdom is “evoked” by “being in rapport with the mystery of reality” (cited in Miller, 2006, p. 72).

Sorting Through Life Experience Soulfully

Carl Jung (2009) wrote: “Hence, I had to speak to my soul as to something far off and unknown, which did not exist through me, but through whom I existed”. Jung believed that he had to call upon “her as a living and self-existing being” (p. 129). In The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind, Robert Romanyshyn (2007) claims that “feeling is a function of the feeling heart” (p. 287). The soul is a feeling being and will look into a personal wound with love, mourn and interpret experience within a metaphoric sensibility. The soul also integrates both the light and dark of human life.

The soul will guide the inquirer back to the beginning, not to where everything seems perfect and pristine, but to where life “speaks”. As a child, I wandered through the apple orchards and carried my adopted brother Jim when our family went to the river to fish. As a teenager, our family of seven lived with six children with disabilities; a world of races and abilities gathered around our table. With everyone humming, laughing, and talking passionately, the sound of that table was holism and humanism. Each person was sounding out what it means to be included, as Jean Vanier (2008) explained to us when he visited. However, to challenge the idealism of everything our family thought was true about being human, one day my brother, who suffered from schizophrenia, was violently restrained and died. Jim was black and his life mattered to us. Imagining my anxiety as a giant harp, some of the strings still sound through memories of Jim, and my mother’s dream of inclusion, which was both heavy and beautiful.

Methods

Writing is a research method. The research journal that provided an important data source for this study chronicled life experiences, dreams, and meditations since the year 2005. Definitions for terms such as the ego were achieved through exploring symbols in these journal entries. For example, the ego’s shadow is understood as driven-ness. As van Manen (2016) has outlined, phenomenological research includes a variety of philological methods, namely heuristic, experiential, insight cultivation, vocative and interpretive writing approaches. In response to the World Health Organization’s invitation to reach out and talk about anxiety, I interviewed two women who were given the pseudonyms Eliska and Aidya. The interviews took place at a table that overlooks Lake Ontario. I recorded and transcribed the interviews.

Aidya

Aidya talked with me on a cool summer’s evening at dusk. The mosquitos were swarming and bats swooped through the night air. Aidya had just finished a long hot day caring for young children. She is married with two older children; one daughter and one son who has autism. She is a smart, socially engaged woman in her mid-fifties. She fondly recalled watching bats as she played as a young child.
Aidya began explaining the anxiety she experiences as a black mother with a son who is nineteen. Throughout the conversation, her phone was turned on. She apologized, explaining that she needed to receive texts about where her son was going and how he would return home safely. Her husband was harassed by the police as a young teen. Twenty years ago, police would take young black teenage boys and rough them up down on the beach by forcing them to their knees and putting a gun to their head. The fear that her son will be subject to such violence is an anxiety Aidya lives with on a daily basis.

Aidya is also a day-care provider, a reflexologist, and an energy healer. She had recently finished tending to her daughter’s serious illness. After many agonizing weeks, doctors discovered a rare but curable disease. Her daughter now gently accuses Aidya of being a hovering parent, but there is reason for her parenting vigilance. Aidya’s life as a child and young adult was not simple. Her father was overwhelmed with her mother’s mental illness and left his wife with eight young children. Social assistance would come in the mail in the form of a check, but no one from social services came to make sure that the children were safe:

She did not have anyone to help her. They just left her with all these kids. I remember looking out the window and just crying as a little kid, staring out the window and just praying, “If you get me through this I will work hard and get my family through this.” I was just 7 or 8. Just a little kid.

The image of a scared young girl, praying at a window inspired an unusual resonance with my originating dream. Never knowing that Aidya’s mother suffered from schizophrenia, I was in awe listening to how she navigated her childhood and dedicated her adult years to strong family relationships.

Eliska

I talked with Eliska by the lake on a sunny summer afternoon. Eliska often enjoys nature by collecting herbs, gardening, and pursuing a passion for trees. A rabbit and a groundhog nibbled on grass nearby. Animal visitations such as this usually only happen when I am alone. Eliska is a white woman in her early sixties who lives in the suburbs and provides daycare for her grandson and support for her daughter’s business. She has also cared for her parents for the past 44 years.

Eliska is married and has two daughters. She is a heartfelt woman, a talented artist and marvelously witty. It was moments into the conversation when she described how her mother and grandparents risked a treacherous escape from their home country: “They were wealthy business owners, with a large home, gardens, and servants”. The family came to Canada from Czechoslovakia in 1950, escaping in the night “like the story of The Sound of Music”. Her mother and grandmother walked away from the homeland they loved: “They came with nothing but the knapsacks on their back. All the money was gone”.

In Canada, their life radically changed. Eliska’s mother worked long hours to build a business while three generations of their family lived together and struggled to make ends meet. Eliska’s grandmother was educated and fluent in seven languages: “My grandmother was a maid and cleaned other people’s toilets. And she took any hand-me-down clothes that the rich ladies gave her”. The family gathered every year to remember their escape.

Spirituality

Aidya has explored spirituality through various practices, naming yoga as a recent one. She explained: “This has been a crazy difficult year . . . When my daughter got sick I was meditating before that . . . then when she got sick I couldn’t do it . . .”. Aidya had to set aside her meditation classes to become a healer and advocate for her daughter. She explained an embodied perspective on spirituality:
The Coexistence of Spirituality & Anxiety

When I do something, I do it from my heart. I think of how it is affecting somebody else. I think that is what spirituality is. Knowing that and being mindful about how you are affecting other people. So, when I was on the yoga journey, I realized that and it was confirming that I was doing the right thing. I was being very spiritual. I volunteered at the school. If my neighbors needed anything I would go to bat for them and do it. I did a lot of spiritual work.

The following comment is an important aspect of Aidya’s interview and provides insight into the types of spiritual experience that are not yet accepted in normative discourses about spirituality and learning:

It was weird because I was astral travelling at an early age and I would not remember the journey. I’d pop back into my body with all the weird sounds and paralysis. I thought I was crazy. What’s happening to me? What am I doing? Is someone holding me down? And I was just led down that path. All of a sudden, I was doing research into why I was feeling . . . or why I knew things before they happened.

One practical outlet for Aidya’s desire to become a healer is reflexology. She applied pressure to her daughter’s feet almost every day while her daughter was in the hospital. Smiling, Aidya admitted that she might have been anxious about her daughter’s recovery, as there should be a period of time between each treatment.

Rejecting the idea that spirituality is dependent on a designated practice, Eliska explained that spirituality for her is a part of who she is:

It is not what I do but a part of who I am . . . And I have always known that. It has always been there. At times, I am much more connected to it than others, of course. Where there is stress and anxiety, you sort of get ripped from that place. I am not a church-goer. Never have been. Yet I am extremely deeply connected to . . . to everything . . . to people, to, to, to the plants, to the air I breathe, animals, everything, everything. The older I get I know it. I know it. When I get to my wits’ end, I realize I am going there on a very superficial plane, which is not at all who I am. As soon as it hits me, I can reconnect. I can immediately reconnect. I don’t have to be in a church or in meditation. It is a sudden and complete shift back—back to where I belong, back to where I need to be. I’ll feel it when I’m driving because I’ll feel my spirit singing.

I lamented that it is challenging to live openly in society; masks are needed to protect the deep self. Choosing a metaphor that does not mask the face, Eliska said:

I think we are spiritual beings, we are just so busy with the noise in our heads that we don’t feel it. Everyone’s at their own level and everyone’s evolving . . . maybe we need to discover what level we can function at peacefully and harmoniously so we do not have to put on that hat . . . We all have to function as a whole. But everyone’s at a different level.

Mothers and Daughters

I did not want either woman to feel as if they placed the blame for their anxieties on their mothers. There was tremendous emotion and passion in their voices as they talked about their mothers. For years Aidya carried the fear that she, too, would live with schizophrenia:

I used to worry “Okay, is this genetic and I am going to eventually come down with schizophrenia?” I asked my doctor and she said that it does run in people’s families. I felt I was doing everything possible to keep myself healthy and that took away the fear of being unhealthy. My mom was healthy. Other than that, I wanted to be like her. I understood that her mind was ill, but I thought she was a very amazing human being inside this problem she had.
Yet, as a girl, Aidya kept the curtains closed so no one would see her mother staring or talking with her voices:

You feel that the world did not understand . . . I did not want anyone to misunderstand her and treat her . . . She had no safety net. There was no one to catch her. She had eight kids and we were not old enough to handle it. And her siblings did not know what to do with someone who was that ill. There was nothing. She did not have parents that stepped in.

In Aidya’s late teens, her mother became homeless. Aidya took time to nurture herself and focused on her health. However, one day she saw her mother on the street and decided to fulfill the promise she made as a young girl. She made space for her mother in her small, one bedroom apartment. Eliska also admired and was devoted to her mother. Her voice trembled as she pointed out: “My mother’s anxiety . . . touched me deeply, deeply, it completely rubbed off”. It manifested daily:

There was always a tension. For example, a meal. A dinner. As soon as the soup was served and as soon as the first person was finished my mother was hovering ready to lift that plate. There couldn’t be a lull, a moment so we could speak and just have a moment . . . I used to say to my Mom, “Can’t you just sit back and just enjoy it?” But it wasn’t to be. Now I am worried about her and now I am jumping up. And by the time dinner was finished it was knots in my stomach. It was not enjoyable. It felt like an obligatory thing to have dinners . . .

As a teenager Eliska wanted to break free from the family’s devotion to the old country, but the obligation to family values and language continued. Anxiety intensified at the age of 16 when her mother fell ill with breast cancer. Eliska’s mother died at the age of 92, suffering from breast cancer and Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

**Heightened Anxiety**

I asked both women to relay moments where their anxieties heightened and affected their perceptions. Just after Aidya’s father passed away, she had a full-blown anxiety attack:

I had a really bad anxiety attack in a furniture store. I was standing in line and all of a sudden it felt like the room moved in on me. It was like dodododo (hands move together in rhythm) my eyes were like this, tunnel. It wasn’t like there was something wrong with me, but I knew that it was anxiety. I was having a panic attack. I calmed myself down by saying, “It’s Okay, this is not really happening, close your eyes.” I think that it was because I was not dealing with his death. That was my first bout of anxiety. I have had two . . . where you get that overwhelming fear.

Aiyda knew that the panic attack was because:

I don’t cry enough. I do not sit by the water . . . sit on the grass or lie under a tree to let those energies release. But I caught it: “Okay, breathe close your eyes, don’t stare”. I actually felt as if I was going to faint . . . I thought I would faint. If I stare at this happening, my mind would say there is something wrong with me. I was going to die . . . I knew that if I stared and panicked my brain would say there is something wrong and it would become a real thing.

Having the experience of knowing what she needs to do to care of herself, Aidya was able to coax herself out of the narrowing affect. Eliska talked about the toll that many dedicated years of serving her family had on her body:
It accumulates. The years all building of my mother’s bad health and two years solid. I ended up in hospital. My heart started racing and I had to have surgery to have it stop. But I never stopped to have those moments. The anxiety kept building until it exploded.

I asked Eliska to describe what happens to her body:

I become disconnected to self. Completely disconnected at that moment. Overwhelmed. As if there is a boa constrictor wrapping around my whole being, my soul, choking my soul. I become that person on a different level. Because it all takes over. Suddenly that overwhelming-ness of . . . this and that and the other, has to be done and everyone wants a piece of me and somehow, I have to work it all out and it becomes a battle.

Carl Jung (2009) wrote that transformational growth occurs when our sense of self is not defined by events and thoughts. This wisdom is implicit in Eliska’s statement:

Yeah, and it is probably myself that triggers it the most. I am starting to see at this age. It is not the situations. I can see where I had come by it honestly. However, I’m the one that’s responsible for it. There wouldn’t be anything if I did not put the pressure on myself. I am doing it to myself . . . That is my challenge now, trying to figure out how to navigate it. I am aware of it.

Pushing Through

Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist (2010) writes about the detrimental effect of intransigent left-brain positivity. The left brain will “insist on its theory at the expense of getting things wrong” (p. 82). Although Aidya has facilitated healing for herself and her family, she admits that when life is really challenging she reverts back to her childhood conviction that she must push through alone:

“Watch me I can do it.” It’s just another bump in the road and . . . nobody was there and I don’t expect anyone to be there. Because I was focused on getting her well. I wasn’t going to let Spirit take her. Because I was focused on getting her well. . . . If I lost focus how am I going to return to get that strength back? There was no adult that helped my mother . . .

Ironically, Aidya’s family was offering support during her daughter’s illness but she could not seem to bring herself to accept their help. When Eliska’s mother was at the end of her life, Eliska found herself also enclosed in her own determination to fix her mother’s failing health:

When my mom died . . . they put us in palliative care . . . I was so obsessed with making everything better. To not make her better, that is what I had a horrible time with . . . [weeps]. I failed her . . . and um . . . and that affects the heart, it’s the very heart, it’s completely unrealistic and completely ridiculous . . . anybody would say, are you out of your mind? All that time I wasn’t connected.

Essential Insight: Loving the Self

In a recent holistic education conference keynote, John P. Miller (2017) proposed four core virtues for holistic education: trust, love, joy, and mystery. bell hooks (2016) also critiques “. . . misguided notions of self-love. We need to stop fearfully equating it with self-centredness: Self-love is the foundation for a loving practice” (p. 67). As an adult, Aidya turned to self-care to heal from her childhood:
I went on a journey of self-awareness to recover from not being taken care of. So, I went into fitness. That made me more spiritual because I was so fit. I would ride down by the beach and just sit by the water by myself and just absorb, and I never had any anxiety because I was healthy and connected to my body.

Eliska responded to a question about caring for the self:

I always felt like it was something selfish: “I’ve got this” . . . Even with kids, jump, jump, jump, do, do . . . that is where you lose yourself. I knew who my self was. I felt the anxiety up until the point where I got ill. It kept building up and building up.

In an embodied example of Miller’s four virtues, Eliska described her insight into how to trust the quiet so that she can encounter the deep self:

I think that you can never know yourself or find yourself when you are looking. I think you find yourself when you can finally be quiet, long enough that it comes to you, it emerges . . . As things are going, going and you say, I need to find self. And I have to find time for the self. No, that it is on that same plane of putting another pressure on your list, another to do. No, you won’t find it because that self is in that quiet place. Like even if you all of a sudden say, “Okay. I am going to meditate so my self is going to come.” No, because the self did not come in that meditation. Because I kept waiting for it and it did not come. However, the quiet that brought me to that quiet place where I can quiet myself and stop with the noise in my head—and then the self is there. And when you are able to connect with it suddenly, then you can bump into it a little bit and feel it. And then when you start connecting with it you can have a conversation with it and you can say, “What would make the heart sing?”

A Letter to Our Daughters

To my stepdaughter, to Eliska’s daughters, and Aidya’s daughter. To Angela, who is now a successful singer. And to our future grandchildren; to all the young women I have taught and worked with. These are the wise words of two women to whom I am deeply grateful. I hope you remember this generation of women who were very much a part of this anxious time and this spiritual searching. Remember us with love and compassion. As we were trying to figure out how things hang together, perhaps we thought that our work and will would triumph. We were wrong. I know we taught you to achieve and to focus, to overcome, sometimes at all cost, but there are times, very rich times, where surrender to the deep self will nurture you more than a dream of success. Life experience must be accepted as a whole; both the light waves and the dark waves pass through you in the ocean of life’s experience. Do not push your self all the time, neither your heart, your service, nor your intellect: take time to see how all things on this earth are connected and trust the mystery that holds this life.

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References

