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# Theory of Metamorphic Learning

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# THEORY OF METAMORPHIC LEARNING

**by**

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DISSERTATION

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# Dedication

I dedicate this labor of love, sacrifice, and everything in between, to all who are in the midst of a dissertation effort. Always keep your focus and faith in the journey.

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I have so many to acknowledge and thank for pushing and pulling me through this monumental phase of my life—nearly a decade of blood, sweat, and tears.

To my dear friends and cohorts, Patrick and Julia Keller— no words can justify what your support and friendship has meant to me. Without it, I'm not sure I would or *could* have finished. But please do not introduce me to any more men ☺ To my cohorts, Tracy Hart and Rebeca Gibrail—the gift of your friendship has been so special. You are next in line! To our original Doc CoP members: Pam Verstynen, Ann List, Rebeca Gibrail, Barbara Rothweiler, Ali Green— thank you deeply for your conversation, experience, expert guidance, mentoring, support, and celebration.

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Last, and most important, I greatly thank each of my study participants for the gift of their personal experiences, wisdom, and insights. I especially thank the first one, who inspired this study. We can all learn much of value from each of you.

I now invite you, my readers, to join me in this learning journey that involved "not knowing what is not known" (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). For me, it was a reflexive journey that I could not preordain, but one that brought me many gifts, and will continue to ever evolve.

"Every human action, whether it has become positive or negative, must depend on motivation." ~ His Holiness, The Dalai Lama

"Learn to get in touch with the silence within yourself, and know that everything in life has purpose. There are no mistakes, no coincidences, all events are blessings given to us to learn from." ~Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

"The greatest discovery of my generation is that man can alter his life simply by altering his attitude of mind." ~William James

## Definition of Metamorphic[1]

Etymology

From metamorphosis + -ic

Adjective

**metamorphic**

(geology) Having been structurally altered as a result of, or resulting from, exposure to intense heat and/or pressure (at the contact zone between colliding plates, for example).

Noun

**metamorphic** (*plura*l metamorphics)

(mineralogy) A rock that has been changed from its original form by subjection to heat and/or pressure.

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[1] Wiktionary (http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/metamorphic, accessed September 30, 2014).
[2] All pilot study participants were assigned a pseudonym.
[3] Chinese term for life force, or energy.
[4] Zen is a school of Buddhism that originated in China during the 6th century, and spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Zen emphasizes achieving enlightenment and direct insight through study of Buddhist teachings (Anonymous, 2011b).

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Abstract

Using holistic grounded theory with participant selection through a self-designed survey, a preliminary theory and model of metamorphic learning for 16 adults who reported sudden, life-altering events emerged. Supporting the humanistic theoretical interpretations were the conceptual frameworks of transformative learning, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and positive psychology. An emic and in vivo definition led the findings about this complex, multi-faceted, and on-going learning event that profoundly impacted self-identity, direction, and quality of life. The event was a *catalyst* for a constructive learning, redefinition, and change process. Participants chose to confront and accept their changed reality first through critical reflection, after which positive attitudes started occurring and, second, individuated through self-examination. The majority reported a negative event but considered the learning outcomes to be positive. Impacts included a more present-focused orientation, healing, self-wisdom, changed priorities, and actualizing new roles, including mentoring and teaching others. "Moving forward" was a guiding metaphor of strength through a process characterized by four

types of learning: (1) epiphanic learning; (2) self-directed, discovery learning, also called social deconstructive unlearning and reconstruction; (3) metamorphic learning; and (4) continuous learning. The sudden realization shortly after the event may be a key impetus for what the majority expressed as a holistic growth or regeneration process, versus resilience. Because the clinical psychology concept of posttraumatic growth does not encompass a positive sudden, life-altering event, this researcher suggests a new construct of "post-event redefinition." Implications include vicarious learning through storytelling.

*Keywords*: transformative adult learning, positive psychology, positive growth, wellbeing, life-altering event, grounded theory

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Glenn's Story

Herein is the story Glenn told to me, like it had happened yesterday, of an event he experienced at a young age, when he was just out for a day of play:

> It was 1947, and Glenn was 16, enjoying a warm, September day with his friends and his buddy's car in the sand hills outside of town. The buddy with the car also had a 22 pistol. While the others trailed off on foot over the hills, Glenn and his buddy took turns with the pistol, firing away at weeds, trash, and whatever else they could find. After completely emptying the pistol, they put it back in its scabbard and shut it away in the glove compartment of the car. While his buddy headed off elsewhere, Glenn trotted over a sand hill or two, looking around for his other friends. Not finding anyone, he headed back toward the car, when he saw two pretty girls approaching. Glenn waved to them, and they all met up in the car. Taking the pistol out to show off to the girls, Glenn put it up to his head and pulled the trigger with his thumb on the hammer so it couldn't hit all the way. Three times he pulled the trigger, and it seemed to him as though he let the hammer hit harder each time. By then, the girls were hysterical, so Glenn decided to show them that the gun chamber was empty. But when he broke open the gun, it *wasn't* empty–it was *full* of bullets. Apparently, Glenn's buddy must have come back in the short time while he'd gone over the hill and reloaded it: "I don't know how he had had time to do that and then be completely out of sight . . . I

was absolutely *shocked* when I saw those bullets fall out of the chamber" ("Glenn,"[2] personal communication, November 26, 2011).

In a pilot study interview, Glenn elaborated on how this pivotal event at age 16 altered "everything" for him within a matter of days, including his perceptions, life goals, values, self-identity, and outlook on life. For Glenn, this one event was a defining learning experience, and remains vividly so today, 65 years later.

The following introduces my research quest to learn from adults like Glenn who have experienced what they describe as a sudden, life-altering event. To this end, I begin with my focus statement, purpose of the proposed exploratory study, and what I believe to be the study's significance. Following this, I detail my ontological and epistemological perspectives. I then present my research questions and a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed my study. I conclude this introductory chapter with my researcher's positionality and, lastly, define my terminology, as I understand it.

## Focus Statement

In my life experience, I have observed some adults who, after experiencing a self-described life-altering event, speak about paradigm shifts that seemingly occur "overnight." These shifts are often expressed as involving a type of adult learning that connotes significant positive personal growth, even when a confrontation with adversity, trauma, or the fragility of life is involved. The opportunity I had to informally speak with some individuals who shared their stories with me, as well as a pilot study in which I gathered statistical data and formally interviewed five adults, verified such a sudden, pivotal shift in perspectives with these individuals. My intent with this exploratory study,

[2] All pilot study participants were assigned a pseudonym.

then, was to focus on experiences of this nature to better understand the adult learning process that follows such events.

## Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of my exploratory research was to study adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. To this end, my research goals were to:

- Explore qualitatively what these individuals learn and how by examining reported paradigm shifts that occurred, along with any consequential redefinitions or permanent changes in perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event.
- Generate preliminary grounded theory and a model for the adult learning process involved.
- Discover if any of my findings indicate value for future study and contribution to the literature in adult learning, positive psychology, and/or mental health.

## Significance of the Study

Individuals learn from and individuate themselves through their rich, life experiences. Merriam and Clark (1993) surveyed over 405 adults in a study that found the majority of learning experiences are informal. These scholars concluded that, for learning to be significant, it must be personally valued, and impact the individual by either expanding their knowledge or causing transformation. Similarly, Mezirow (2009) holds that transformative learning is the most significant type of learning in adulthood. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) found that transformation from life-altering events had not

been studied much, although such profound experiences were more commonly reported than they had expected.

As an adult learning theory, transformative learning has primarily been studied within the context of formal education. Knowles (1970) and other adult learning theorists have acknowledged the importance of bringing life experiences to the classroom. Nonetheless, profound, informal, life events have been neglected in research as distinct learning events, except in the emerging area of positive growth following trauma or adversity, where it is most studied within the context of psychological therapy. Furthermore, *sudden*, life-altering events have not been distinguished and studied as central adult learning experiences.

Adversity is common to all our life paths at various points in time, and acknowledged in much of Eastern philosophy as suffering that is all in the mind (Lama, 2008). Some individuals are able to learn and grow positively from adverse experiences. Others are not. Not only do profound life-altering events profoundly affect the lives of those who experience them, but they also affect others around them and carry consequences for both daily life and work. It is well known that depression and stress are epidemic in our society, which holds negative ramifications for society as a whole. Yet, adverse, life-altering experiences are not commonly spoken of.

I assert that learning from those who undergo positive change from sudden, life-altering events is an important emphasis for psychological wellbeing and quality of life. Indeed, I feel that deeply reflecting upon others' important experiences in life holds the potential to transform our own worldview and grow our wisdom. In light of the reported personal significance, occurrence, and learning opportunities within, I see this type of

informal adult learning as important to expose and study. Just as the power of emotional, vicarious learning is evident from many individuals' responses to theater, art, literature, and media, I believe that we can learn vicariously from hearing and reflecting upon the stories of such individuals. To this end, I purport such study can lead to the design of interventions that may assist with fostering learning and positive growth from challenge and adverse events in those for whom it does not come easily. Implications from a better understanding that I perceive include vicarious learning applications at the individual, organizational, and social level, with an emphasis on using positive strengths and values as a transformative adult learning framework. For, in life, we embody and enact our signature strengths and values.

## Perspective

As primarily a qualitative researcher, my perspective behind this inquiry is that of the postmodern constructivist-interpretivist, wherein my ontological position embraces other ways of knowing and multiple realities that are experientially and socially constructed. My humanistic epistemological stance is to actively and empathetically engage with my participants to better understand and describe their interpretations of these subjective realities (Glesne, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schram, 2006). Postmodern humanism centers on developing the holistic inner self, transformation, values, meaning, interpretation, and reflection through continuous, organic learning at higher levels of consciousness (Driscoll, 2005; Maslow, 1943, 1968/1999, 1970; Merriam, 2001). It follows that the methodology I favor for interpretation is qualitative, and focuses on induction, seeking patterns, and discovering theory from within the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

## Research Questions

To discover the adult learning process and outcomes with sudden, life-altering events and to generate theory, I examined several questions with a grounded theory methodological approach. The overarching research question I proposed was:

- What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event?

To develop this primary research question, I proposed the following three sub-questions:

- What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event?
- Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why?
- What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event?

Table A1 in Appendix A is a planning matrix I adapted from Maxwell's (2005) model, which relates these research questions to the data collection and analysis methods I used in my study, as well as to what I seek to better understand and share with this inquiry.

## Theoretical Frameworks

A researcher's choice of theoretical frameworks should align with their epistemological stance, as well as their areas of knowledge. Consequently, the supporting frameworks for my academic work encompass several adult learning theories and constructs from postmodern humanism, which I have previously mentioned centers

on developing the holistic inner self, transformation, values, meaning, interpretation, and reflection through continuous, organic learning at higher levels of consciousness (Driscoll, 2005; Maslow, 1943, 1968/1999, 1970; Merriam, 2001). My readers will note that I often integrate Eastern ways of knowing in my work, not only in an attempt to respect other perspectives, but also to add depth and substance to the larger view of an idea or theory. As a postmodern humanist and a student of adult learning theory, I hold a conjoining interest in positive psychology.

In the following, I briefly introduce what I perceived were potential relevant areas of the literature from a triad of theoretical frameworks, upon which I drew to frame my inquiry. Chapter 2 extends this review. Specifically, I focus here on aspects of humanism, transformative learning theory, and positive psychology. Whether or not the participants I interviewed experienced transformative learning and how they perceived of it (i.e., positively or negatively) defined the basic inquiry behind my research study. In short, the participants' perceptions informed the theory and model I constructed using grounded theory methodology, wherein I examined their descriptions of the learning process involved in their experiences within these trans-disciplinary theoretical frameworks. That examination can be found in Chapter 4.

**Humanism**

For this study, I drew upon humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation as conveyed through his classic, five-level hierarchy of needs. The roots of this hierarchy are the basic biological and physiological needs, from which safety, love, esteem, and, finally, self-actualization needs successfully follow. Maslow purported that people are motivated by middle- and higher-level, interpersonal growth

needs after the basic needs are met, but also acknowledged biology, culture, and place as influencing factors.

Maslow began conceptualizing a sixth level of his hierarchy, that of self-transcendence, which was not published until after his passing, and which redefined his philosophy about the purpose of life, according to Koltko-Rivera (2006). In short, to better understand the learning experience of a life-altering event, I felt that Maslow's amended six-level hierarchy of needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943) might be useful in offering a general conceptual and theoretical interpretation. I conceive of his hierarchy as levels of learning and knowing that empower our motivations, perceptions, beliefs, and values, and that manifest as our *qi,*[3] or vitality, and behaviors with individual variation that is dependent upon our life priorities.

**Transformative Learning Theory**

Sudden, life-altering events are subjectively defined through diversity in individual perception, and may include job loss, grief, disability, illness, combat, rape, abuse, or natural disaster, as well as positive, "peak" (Maslow, 1970) or joyous experiences, such as childbirth. There is a great body of research within the domain of traditional psychology concerning the negative consequences of traumatic, life-altering experiences, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. However, positive growth following trauma or adversity, referred to as post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, or positive growth from trauma, is an emerging field today within psychology and mental health. I believe that this type of positive growth depicts transformative learning, albeit from trauma, adversity, or a peak experience.

[3] Chinese term for life force, or energy.

Much like Maslow's (1943) motivational theory, transformative learning offers a holistic framework that embraces affect (i.e., emotion and feeling), according to some scholars. As a theory of adult learning, or andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformative learning promotes deep change, as individuals are challenged or motivated to question, ponder, and evaluate their personal assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs, all of which inform their espoused values and actual behaviors (Cranton, 2006). Rather than being additive knowledge, this type of learning requires the ability to critically reflect upon existing knowledge and assumptions. Perhaps the ideas of Jung, as referenced by Campbell (1971), who was concerned with self-identity and who obviously influenced Maslow, were precursors to Jack Mezirow's (2009) theory of transformative learning, which he defined as the most significant learning in adulthood. Mezirow sees transformative learning as an incremental, reconstructive, dialogic, rational, and long-term process, which alters frames of reference and perspectives to encompass individuation, and which I relate to Jung's concept of the Self in forming an identity.

Transformative learning theory has evolved since Mezirow's original conception. Pointing to the importance of affective ways of knowing in this reflective process, Taylor (2009) distinguishes between the scholars who emphasize self-transformation (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Lange, 2004, 2009; Mezirow, 2009), and those who see transformative learning as socially emancipatory (Brookfield, 2005; K. M. Brown, 2006; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Freire, 1970/1984). Taylor (2009) notes that both sides view learning from experience as being socially constructed, which can be deconstructed, or broken down and explored for better understanding, assimilation, and acceptance, through dialogue with others and reflection, which are

external and internal learning processes, respectively. Taylor highlights what he sees as the importance of context and relationships, and maintains that readiness to change is vital for transformative learning.

On the self-transformation side within the context of adult learning, Lange (2004, 2009) points out that such learning may involve a somatic response with perspective being influenced by intuition, symbols, and place, as well as sociocultural norms. Speaking of Freire's positive "pedagogy of hope," discussed by McLaren (2000), Lange views experiential learning as a catalyst for positive transformation. Boyd and Myers (1988) proposed a model of transformative education based on analytical depth psychology, asserting that transformation is an inner journey of individuation, or a lifelong process of understanding through reflection on the psychological structures (ego, shadow, persona, and collective unconscious) that make up our self-identity. As reviewed by Dirkx (2000), transformation for Boyd involves a fundamental change in personality that involves the resolution of a personal dilemma and an expansion of consciousness through reflection, ultimately resulting in greater personality integration. For Boyd, three key processes that lead to transformation are receptivity, recognition, and grieving, and it is only through transformative learning that significant change can occur in an individual's psychosocial development. For this scholar, the purpose of perspective transformation is to free the individual from unconscious assumptions and cultural norms that constrain self-actualization, which I note is at the top of Maslow's (1943) classic hierarchy of needs. Finally, Boyd holds that transformative learning is a long-term process that involves reconciling the first half of life and meaningfully integrating it with

the second half. I interpret this view as an internal "unlearning" process that is akin to what I term, "social deconstructivism."

Clearly, the two factions Taylor (2009) identifies are not so black and white. Critical theorists Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) assert that Western sociocultural norms represent the privileged, White, heterosexual, and able-bodied, and hold that perspective and structural transformation must come before social action. Brookfield (2005) also frames transformative learning with critical theory, arguing for the examination of power structures and norms.

With what I see as contrary to the social constructionist views Taylor (2009) describes, Brown (2006) holds that individuals change through an affective, intuitive, inner process, rather than a rational, cognitive, social sequence. To me, this reveals a more holistic, self-oriented view of transformative learning. Similarly, Dirkx and Smith (2009) focus on emotional, spiritual, and symbolic aspects, referring to transformative learning as inner "soul work." In contrast to other scholars, they maintain that the irrational unconscious most influences our behavior.

**Positive Psychology**

As mentioned, a primary intention with this inquiry is to examine whether or not a sudden, life-altering event is perceived by individuals who report this experience as, overall, a positive or negative event. Emerging research is studying those who do view such an experience positively, even when the event itself is traumatic. A relatively new domain within the social sciences, positive psychology (Seligman, 2002, 2011) focuses on positive emotions, character attributes, and sociocultural institutions. Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide a framework for the scientific study of "signature" attributes in

individuals, classifying 24 character strengths under the six historically and culturally universal virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. They maintain that character strengths, as the building blocks of wellbeing, can change from life events, lifestyle change, and intervention. With its strengths-based approach to learning and change, positive psychology attracts me as being compatible with transformative learning theory, and is clearly the unique approach adult learning theorist Lange (2004, 2009) favors.

## Positionality

Because humanism embraces other ways of knowing, and interpretivist-constructivism values multiple realities, I honor subjective experiences as reported by others. My intention with this exploratory study was to focus on the experiences of a few individuals in a manner that might enlighten us, as well as reveal whether or not any future study in this area is warranted.

Conventional, evidence-based research is concerned with validity, reliability, and generalization, all of which are of lesser concern to the interpretivist. With qualitative research, rigor and quality convey trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003), which is considered by some to be of primary concern, more so than validity. According to Maxwell (2005), however, demonstrating validity, or credibility, is a key issue in any research design, but is more so in qualitative research because it is not acknowledged as empirically scientific methodology by those of the positivist bent. To this end, I attempted to do my best to demonstrate trustworthiness and validity, which was the extent to which I am able to describe, measure, and explain what I interpret by selecting my sample through a survey instrument, backing up my assertions with literature, seeking

peer review, and embracing rigorous data analysis methods, including triangulation, member checking, and comparative analysis (Willig, 2008).

Denzin (2010) cites grounded theorist Charmaz, who defines four criteria for qualitative research: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. I can hope that my study will offer useful, new insights into transformative learning theory and, in particular, the experience of a sudden, life-altering event. By gathering the stories of a few individuals who report such experiences, I reflected upon and analyzed this data in a meticulous manner that I hope honors and aligns with their subjective realities, and resonates with others who share similar experiences.

Reliability, whereby another researcher could replicate my findings, is important with quantitative research, but less so for qualitative inquiry because the researcher is examining and interpreting a particular phenomenon or experience that is unique to each individual. Indeed, a central premise of qualitative research is the acknowledgement of multiple, subjective realities, wherein the researcher's positionality influences and shapes the findings. I do feel, however, that another researcher following my particular methodology might hear similar stories and themes, although interpretations would likely differ, in part because of unique researcher positionality.

Enhancing validity and reliability involves reflexivity or self-disclosure (Creswell, 2007) on the part of the researcher. Reflexivity necessitates awareness and continuous self-reflection about how one's positionality contributes to the interpretation and construction of meaning throughout the data analysis process (Willig, 2008). To this end, my female heterosexual gender, middle-class social status, white race, able body, and Christian religion cannot help but influence my research efforts. My humanist bent

is perhaps given as a well-educated, world-travelled, mature female. In fact, having been raised during my formative years in a developing country, I have some difficulty identifying with the U.S. as my native culture. Although I do not examine topics from a specific critical, feminist, racial, or religious lens, my rich life experiences generated my interest in pursuing this proposed study, and framed my interpretations.

As the sole investigator for this inquiry, I approached it as a compassionate outside observer, not having experienced what I perceive to be a "sudden, life-altering event." Through both positive and negative life events, I have experienced transformative learning along the lengthy, incremental path that Mezirow (2009) describes, although, based on my experience, I side with the more affective and intuitive perspectives (K. M. Brown, 2006; Dirkx, 2001; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Lange, 2004, 2009; E. W. Taylor, 2009). I trust that my stance as an open, resilient, life-long adult learner seeking to contribute to new ways of knowing how positive learning experiences and change can be cultivated, openly shared, and taught counters any inherent bias. I truly aimed to approach this inquiry with a "beginner's mind," a central Zen Buddhist[4] tenet.

## Definition of Terms

Many of the terms I use have various meanings, depending on their academic or colloquial usage. Here, I provide basic definitions for the layperson, as I generally understand and use these terms.

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[4] Zen is a school of Buddhism that originated in China during the 6th century, and spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Zen emphasizes achieving enlightenment and direct insight through study of Buddhist teachings (Anonymous, 2011b).

Andragogy–adult learning theory and instruction (Knowles, 1970), as distinguished from pedagogy, or the process of teaching, in general.

Constructivism–an epistemological framework that views learning and understanding as interactive, dynamic, and generative, created, or constructed, through a process.

Epistemology–how an individual defines the nature of knowledge, or their worldview, as they perceive it.

Grounded theory–explanation and assertion that is based on, or constructed from, collected research data.

Humanism–a philosophical concern that prioritizes human-centered values and the subjective human experience.

Interpretivist-constructivist–an epistemological framework that centers on forming knowledge from the interpretation of multiple social realities.

Ontology–how an individual defines the nature of their being in the world, as they perceive it.

Organic learning–fluid, whole-life, holistic, grounded, and natural learning.

Postmodernism–a philosophical perspective that embraces multiple social realities, meaning, and values.

Self-actualization–realizing one's full potential in life.

Self-transcendence–going beyond or outside of a concern with the Self to consider others and the environment.

Transformative learning–a process of learning in adults who can make abstractions, which involves the ability to re-evaluate and significantly change their perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, values, attitudes, and/or behaviors.

Wisdom–its definition has been debated throughout time, but I define wisdom as the ability to draw on deep, inner knowledge with compassionate insight and the consideration of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and perspectives, to determine what is "best" and "authentic" to say or do within the present context and moment.

## Summary

To close this chapter, I have introduced to you my dissertation work, which is an exploratory research study featuring grounded theory to better understand and conceptualize the learning process in adults who have experienced what they describe as a sudden, life-altering event. I assert that a better understanding of those who undergo positive change from sudden, life-altering events provides an important learning opportunity for others. As a compassionate constructivist-interpretivist, I merged the theoretical frameworks of humanism, transformative learning theory, and positive psychology to frame this inquiry. Appendix H gives my dissertation timeline. In the next chapter, I present a more extensive review of the literature I perceived as relevant to my study.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

As a student of adult learning theory with a particular interest in the field of positive psychology, I adhere to humanistic epistemological philosophies. In the following, I first review the literature that informs these philosophies and the trans-disciplinary theoretical frameworks from which I viewed my inquiry. In particular, the supporting frameworks that I saw as possibly relevant for this academic work encompass several adult learning theories and constructs from postmodern humanism, which centers holistically on developing the whole person, change and transformation, values, meaning, interpretation, and reflection through continuous, organic learning at higher levels of consciousness (Driscoll, 2005; Maslow, 1943, 1968/1999, 1970; Merriam, 2001). These frameworks include humanist Abraham Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs (1943), transformative learning theory, and positive psychology, all of which I will discuss in more detail to follow. Within the paradigm of positive psychology, I highlight the strength of wisdom as a guide for my study. This review of the literature also presents current knowledge within the mental health realm of post-traumatic growth. Out of this body of literature, I identify the gaps I perceive, which I aimed to address with my research. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a review of the literature that informed my own rendering of a grounded theory methodological framework that I view as appropriate for this exploratory study.

Without bringing in preliminary hypotheses, existing theory, or assumptions because that is a defining characteristic of grounded theory research methodology, this study appropriately commenced with "not knowing what is not known" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A part of this "not knowing" involves a lack of literature to direct the

study. To gauge some direction backed by literature, I conducted a pilot study, wherein survey results and a top-level qualitative analysis to uncover emerging themes brought to light some base knowledge with which to inform my review of what I viewed as the potentially pertinent literature.

Furthermore, in true grounded-theory fashion, the researcher desires to become immersed in constructive analysis with a single participant before proceeding to the next. In this successional process, what the first participant discusses informs the questions the researcher will ask of the next participant. Indeed, with grounded theory, the researcher ideally must totally surrender to the process itself, allowing "raw" knowledge and forming conceptions to unfold slowly, participant by participant. No predetermined hypothesis should guide the construction of the theory, nor should literature or theory inform the analysis, nor must any preformed assumptions interfere with the metamorphosis within the grounded theory process itself. Thus, herein is a preliminary review of the literature, offered as an orientation to this study and not necessarily intended to stand as defining paradigms (Urquhart, 2007). As Hart (1998) asserts, some evaluation of literature is necessary to acquire an understanding of the research topic, what inquiry has been conducted and how, what is known, and what remains unknown. Consequently, I must clearly emphasize that what literature I am reviewing here is limited and may or may not be relevant to my dissertation findings. The literature I present, however, does show us, in part, what has been done before in related areas of study.

## Adult Learning Theory

The qualitative researcher proposes or extends existing theory from which to learn and help explain others' subjective realities. Driscoll (2005) defines learning theory as a set of constructs that help us to better understand what drives behavior change, and recognizes three basic components: inputs, processes, and results. A particular learning theory may overlap the major epistemological classifications of objectivism, pragmatism, or interpretivism, or serve as a bridge between them, which is found within the overarching adult learning frameworks of behaviorism, cognitivism, social learning, and humanism. For the inquiry I conducted, the later three frameworks held the most relevance.

### Cognitivism

The 17th century exclusively prioritized Cartesian thought and the mind in relation to learning. The individuals I interviewed for my pilot study revealed that cognitive learning was a large part of their sudden, life-altering event. Driscoll (2005) presents cognitivism as a focus on the mental processes of organizing, interpreting, and problem solving. Within this paradigm, she covers constructivist learning theory, which asserts that an individual actively forms new knowledge and understanding from what they already know. Driscoll discusses Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development, wherein children construct an understanding of their physical and social reality, realizing abstract reasoning by the age of 11 to 16. Driscoll points to Bruner (1961), who is best known for discovery learning, which is another classic cognitive learning theory and one that is most relevant to the qualitative research process.

Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the zone of proximal development describes the distance between the current knowledge base and the most effective level to reach. Considered one of the founders of constructivism, Vygotsky is also known for social development theory, which maintains that individuals actively learn through cultural and social contextual interaction.

Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) developed the cognitive apprenticeship concept as an extension of situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which suggests that individuals use cognitive tools to construct new knowledge through social collaboration and scaffolding on existing knowledge. Rogoff (1990) extended the cognitive apprenticeship theory with her premise that learning involves personal, interpersonal, and community processes, incorporating the constructs of modeling, approximating, fading, self-directed learning, and generalizing. According to Hansman (2001), cognitive apprenticeship frames how individuals learn cultural and social expectations from others.

**Social Learning**

One bridge between the epistemological classifications of pragmatism and interpretivism is social learning theory. Social learning theory is a pragmatic view that promotes active, collaborative, experiential learning within relationships with people, culture, and the environment. Beginning with Dewey's well-known work (1938/1997), this adult learning theory focuses on observation, interpretation, and learning by doing. As a cooperative type of learning, social learning theory applies to life and work learning, including the important constructs of motivation and goal setting. I assert that it also depicts the qualitative research approach, in general.

Driscoll (2005) presents Bandura's social learning theory (1976), which goes beyond behaviorism to posit that individuals learn reciprocally from observing, interpreting, and modeling others. According to his theory, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation are necessary conditions for modeling. Opposed to traditional classroom instruction, Lave and Wenger (1991) assert that learning is unintentionally situated within activity, context, and culture, and define this phenomenon as "legitimate peripheral participation." They view social interaction and collaboration as essential to such situated learning, with learners mutually engaged in an organized community of practice. Accordingly, as an individual becomes more involved in a community, they take on the role of an expert. Bandura's (1976) social learning theory relates to Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, and situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in that all three emphasize the larger construct of social learning. There are a host of sub-theories under the umbrella of social learning theory, but I perceived social constructivism, experiential learning, and narrative and vicarious learning as most relevant.

**Social Constructivism.** In contrast with behaviorism, which purports that environmental influences shape learning and, thus, behavior, social constructivism extends the cognitive constructivist paradigm by incorporating other learners and culture in an interactive, dynamic, and continuous learning process (Bransford, Brown, Cocking, Donovan, & Pellegrino, 2000; Driscoll, 2005). With this view, individuals are creators of meaning and knowledge within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978), rather than acquirers of new information. This theory influenced how I developed my research questions, as well as my methodology. More specifically, my methodological approach followed grounded

theory, from which hypotheses are inductively and reflexively created during an interactive inquiry and data analysis process.

**Experiential Learning.** Scaffolding upon the important work of Dewey (1938/1997), who promoted reeducating perception, Kolb (1984) asserts that learning is a process of creating knowledge through the transformation of social and cultural experience. Experiential learning promotes meaning and, thus, engagement. Kolb conceptualized a concise, cyclical learning model that features four sequential stages:

1. Concrete experience → Doing
2. Reflective observation → Observing
3. Abstract conceptualization → Thinking
4. Active experimentation → Planning, which involves Feeling

While Kolb's (1984) model offers a basic description of experiential learning and informed his classic learning styles theory, I do not feel that it accurately depicts the more complex transformative learning process, essentially because it fails to encompass many of the finer elements that are evoked.

**Narrative and vicarious learning.** Narrative learning involves making meaning from constructing stories that convey our values, social norms, cultural traditions, experiences, or dreams. Indeed, reframing our life story is the central premise of Freudian psychoanalysis and other forms of therapy. Such change can also occur through the identification with a powerful story, according to Merriam (2001). As Merriam (2008) points out, human beings have always told stories to make sense of their worldviews and experiences. Storytelling is also a traditional means to vicariously pass on wisdom to younger generations. It is widely believed that storytelling holds healing

value (Bartunek & Woodman, 2009), and is a central tool of Shamanism, a centuries-old spiritual practice that is still alive today.

The embedded construct of vicarious learning, also known as observational learning, is a form of informal, social learning from role models. Although narrative and vicarious learning are primary types of learning for people of all ages in non-Western cultures (Merriam & Associates, 2007), my review of the academic literature on adult learning did not find them discussed much.

**Humanism**

As a student of adult learning theory, I viewed this research effort through the theoretical lenses of cognitivism, social learning, and humanism, although interpretive, humanistic epistemology emerged to dominate my methodological approach. In embracing affective learning, post-modern humanism is concerned with developing the whole person, and centers on change, interpretation, and reason. Rooted in the important work of Freud, and like cognitive learning theory, humanism is oriented toward the internal self, and is applicable to life-long learning at higher levels of consciousness (Driscoll, 2005; Maslow, 1943, 1968/1999, 1970; Merriam, 2001). In contrast, social learning theory is about learning in relationships with people, culture, context, and environment. Within the realm of humanism, I highlight Maslow's theory of motivation (1943).

**Maslow's theory of motivation.** Maslow's theory of motivation (1943), conveyed through his classic, five-level hierarchy of needs, is another bridge between epistemologies, connecting behaviorism with humanism. For this study, I may draw upon Maslow's hierarchy, which he felt explains what motivates our behavior underlying

our life philosophy and values. The roots of his hierarchy are the basic biological and physiological needs, from which safety, belonging and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs progressively develop. Maslow purported that individuals are motivated by the middle- and higher-level, interpersonal growth needs after the basic needs are met, but also acknowledged biology, culture, and context as influencing factors

Maslow began conceptualizing a sixth level of his hierarchy, that of self-transcendence, which was not published until after his passing, and which redefined a framework for notions about the purpose of life, according to Koltko-Rivera (2006). Unable to find a depiction of Maslow's six-level hierarchy (Koltko-Rivera, 2006), I created my own, which I conceive of as levels of learning and knowing that empower our motivations, perceptions, beliefs, and values, and, thus, manifest as our *qi*[5], or energy, and behaviors. Based on my informal discussions and pilot study interviews with adults who experienced what they described as a sudden, life-altering event, I assert that the higher levels of Maslow's amended hierarchy, those of self-actualization and self-transcendence, which I feel represent human potential well, are involved in transformative learning. Figure 2.1 shows my interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy with six levels of needs.

[5] Chinese term for life force, or energy.

Figure 2.1. Maslow's Amended Six-Level Hierarchy of Needs

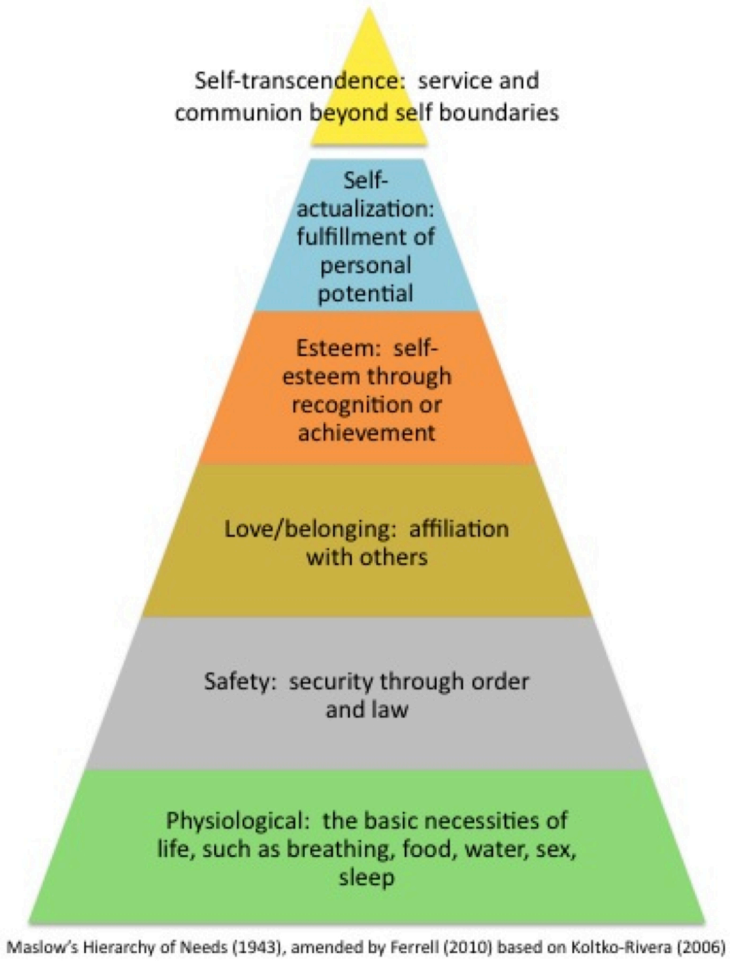


*Figure 2.1.* Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), amended by Ferrell (2010), based on Koltko-Rivera (2006), to show a sixth motivational or need level, that of self-transcendence.

I feel it is important to note that Maslow's hierarchy should not be viewed as a developmental process or life stage theory, although it may operate as such for some individuals. Indeed, an individual may "fit" within a particular level of this hierarchy, depending upon their life situation and concerns, and may or may not ever be motivated to "progress" to another level. In contrast, an individual may "move" to a lower level at

different times in their life. For example, if an individual lives in a neighborhood that becomes besieged by crime or war, their behavior will likely be motivated by the second order of safety needs. Similarly, if an individual loses their home and belongings, they will likely be motivated by the first order of basic psychological needs. Moreover, there are situations where an individual may inappropriately prioritize some needs over others. Consequently, I feel that Maslow's hierarchy should be paradigmatically viewed as different orders of psychological motivation that underlie individuals' values and manifested behaviors. In seeking to gain information that may be relevant to Maslow's motivational framework, I queried interview participants about what their life priorities were prior to and subsequent to their sudden, life-altering event.

In his life's work, Maslow named the field of "Humanistic Psychology," and recognized "peak experiences" (1970), a term he used to describe ecstatic, euphoric, or transpersonal states, which are often associated with religious experiences. Although this term could be used to describe the sudden, life-altering event that triggers the particular learning process I studied, I feel that Maslow was describing a more spiritual phenomenon.

**Self-transcendence.** Other scholars have extended Maslow's concept of self-transcendence, a construct of interest to me because it has emerged as a theme in the informal discussions and pilot study interviews I conducted. Noting omission in both research and psychological personality inventories, Cloninger, Svrakic, and Przybeck, and later with Wetzel (1994; 1993), present a structural and developmental model of personality that accounts for temperament and character. These scholars describe three dimensions of character that they believe mature in adulthood and influence personal and

social ways of being through reflection. Specifically, Cloninger et al. hold that conceptions vary according to the extent to which an individual identifies the Self as autonomous, part of humanity, or connected with the universe as a whole. Personally, I do not see a separation between the later two self-concepts they distinguish (i.e., being a part of humanity and connection with the universe). Of interest to me, however, is that these scholars see each self-concept as corresponding to a character dimension of self-directedness, cooperativeness, and self-transcendence, respectively, and note that mature individuals may display self-transcendence, which they label as a higher-order trait. Cloninger et al. define self-transcendent individuals as unpretentious, fulfilled, patient, creative, selfless, and spiritual. They also express that such individuals seem to be able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, and appear to others as humble and modest, which correlates with suggested defining characteristics of those considered by others to be wise (Bleyl, 2009). Discussing how self-transcendence is the goal of Jungian analysis and certain types of meditation, these scholars also point out that describing self-transcendent experiences is difficult because such cognition is intuitive by nature.

**Transformative Adult Learning Theory**

Like Maslow's (1943) classic motivational theory, transformative learning theory offers a holistic, humanistic framework that embraces affect, or emotion and feeling, and lies behind my interest in the research study I proposed. Merriam (2001, 2008) views transformative learning as a process as well as an outcome of adult development. Cranton (2006) notes that transformational processes have been extensively studied in the domains of psychology, but have only become of interest in the last two decades in the area of adult learning. Viktor Frankl, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May are among those in the

field of psychology who have extensively pursued notions of transformation in their life's work.

As a theory of adult learning, or andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformative learning empowers change, as individuals are challenged or motivated to question, ponder, and evaluate assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs, all of which inform values and behavior (Cranton, 2006). The rationalist German sociologist and philosopher Habermas, and perhaps the ideas of Jung as cited by Campbell (1971), who obviously influenced Maslow, were precursors to the dominant theorist's conception of this phenomenon, Mezirow. First articulated as perspective transformation in 1978 when studying adult women returning to college, Mezirow's (1991) theory is premised on communicative learning, a type of learning conceptualized by Habermas that involves understanding others' values, standards, cultural and social assumptions, feelings, and moral decisions. It is when consideration of these meaning structures involves reflective evaluation of assumptions and leads to changed perspectives that transformative learning occurs, holds Mezirow. Further, Mezirow views meaning structures as two dimensional. The first dimension involves habits of mind, which are general, abstract, orienting, and habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, influenced by cultural, political, social, educational, and economic assumptions (Mezirow, 1997). He elaborates that habits of mind are expressed in a second dimension through our beliefs, judgments, attitudes, and feelings. In short, Mezirow says our original perspectives are assumed without any reasoning at a young age, and become ingrained, manifesting as our subjective realities, biases, and positionality. Our cumulative experiences may gradually change these meaning schemes, which is transformative learning, according to this theorist.

Mezirow (1997) notes that transformative learning can occur as a result of a traumatic experience, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, natural disaster, a debilitating accident, war, job loss, or retirement, but holds that this is less common than its occurrence through formal education. In fact, most of the research on transformative learning has focused on interventions that foster transformative learning in higher education or professional workshop contexts (E. W. Taylor, 2007), which prioritizes andragogy over pedagogy. Following one of Habermas' theories, Mezirow (1997) stresses that transformative learning is predicated in communication, or dialogue, as a catalyst, and not necessarily linked with important life events. Because I do see an important event as a potential catalyst for transformation, I proposed this study to better understand the transformative learning that may occur after a self-reported sudden, life-altering event. Specifically, I aimed to explore how common this type of event might be, what kind of learning is gleaned from it and how, and what the impact is on individuals' lives. I feel that all learning is valuable, whether the source is education, others, or life, itself.

Although Mezirow (2009) prioritizes transformative learning in the context of formal, higher education, he defines it as the most significant type of learning in adulthood, and identified ten stages:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critically assessing assumptions
4. Recognizing a connection between discontent and the process of transformation

5. Exploring options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plan
8. Trying new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence with the new roles and relationships
10. Reintegrating into life with a new perspective

Three key processes form the basis for Mezirow's social constructivist theory on the process of transforming meaning structures: (a) experience, (b) critical reflection, and (c) rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991, 1997). In sum, Mezirow sees this type of learning as an incremental, reconstructive, dialogic, and rational process, which transforms frames of reference and perspectives to encompass individuation, and which I relate to Jung's concept of the Self in forming an identity, as cited by Campbell (1971).

Transformative learning theory has evolved since Mezirow's original, rational conception, although much of the research validates Mezirow's essential premises (E. W. Taylor, 2007). Pointing to the importance of affective ways of knowing in this reflective process, Taylor (2009) distinguishes between the scholars who emphasize self-transformation (Boyd & Myers, 1988; Cranton, 2006; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Lange, 2004, 2009; Mezirow, 2009), and those who see transformative learning as socially emancipatory (Brookfield, 2005; K. M. Brown, 2006; Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Freire, 1970/1984). Taylor (2009) notes that both sides view experience as socially constructed, which can be deconstructed into distinct concepts to be better understood, assimilated, and accepted through dialogue with others and reflection, which are external

and internal learning processes, respectively. He stresses the influence of contexts and relationships, and maintains that readiness to change is most vital.

The two factions Taylor (2009) identifies are not so black and white, however. Critical theorists Butterwick and Lawrence (2009) assert that Western sociocultural norms represent the privileged, White, heterosexual, and able-bodied, and hold that perspective and structural transformation must come before social action. Brookfield (2005) too frames transformative learning in critical theory, arguing for the examination of power structures and norms.

Focusing on the individual within a social context, Cranton and Roy (2003) hold that all transformation involves affect, as well as thought, ways of being, and habits of mind. They define transformative learning as a change in how an individual both affectively experiences and conceptually frames their reality, when pursuing learning that involves personal development, is socially controversial, or requires personal or social healing. Cranton and Roy maintain that, through the process of individuation, a Jungian concept central to analytical depth psychology, we become conscious of our unique, cognitive, psychological Self. Likewise, Brown (2006) holds that individuals change through an affective, intuitive, inner process, rather than a rational, cognitive, social sequence, which reveals an emerging, more holistic, spiritual view of transformative learning. Similarly, Dirkx and Smith (2009) focus on emotional, spiritual, and symbolic aspects, referring to transformative learning as inner “soul” work. In contrast to other scholars, however, they maintain that the irrational unconscious most influences our behavior. Lange (2004, 2009) points out that transformation may involve action as perspective is influenced by intuition, symbols, and place, as well as sociocultural norms.

Speaking of Freire's positive "pedagogy of hope," discussed by McLaren (2000), Lange views experiential learning as a catalyst for both epistemological and ontological transformation. Lange (2004) also associates individuation of the Self and other important relationships with transformative learning.

Boyd and Myers (1988) proposed a model of transformative education based on depth psychology, asserting that transformation is an inner journey of individuation, or a lifelong process of coming to understand the Self through reflection on the inner psychological structures (ego, shadow, persona, collective unconscious) that make up our identity. As reviewed by Dirkx (2000), transformation for Boyd involves a fundamental change in personality, rather than in perspective, which involves resolving a personal dilemma and expanding consciousness through reflection, ultimately resulting in greater personality integration. For Boyd, the three key processes that lead to transformation are receptivity, recognition, and grieving, and it is only through transformative learning that significant change can occur in an individual's psychosocial development. The purpose of perspective transformation is to break free from unconscious content and reified cultural norms and patterns that constrain self-actualization, which I note is at the top of Maslow's (1943) five-level hierarchy. Finally, Boyd holds that transformative learning is a long-term process that involves reconciling and integrating the first half of life with the second. I interpret this view as an internal "unlearning" process that is akin to what I call social "deconstructivism." Thus, this psycho-developmental view spans a lifetime, and involves continuous, incremental, progressive growth, as conceived by Mezirow (1997). Central to all of these transformative learning theories is epistemological change, and not merely change in behavior or the acquisition of knowledge.

Taylor (2008) and others (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009) discuss other concepts of transformative learning theory that are being defined today: neurobiology, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and integral or planetary. Taylor points out that these new views acknowledge diversity and the influence of positionality. For example, Janik (2005) describes neurobiological transformative learning, which occurs in distinct steps, phases, or levels, beginning with object-data and proceeding through association, symbolism, interpretation, and cognition to metacognition and sometimes beyond. Moreover, he asserts that transformative learning is curiosity-based, discovery-driven, and mentor-assisted. This scholar feels that physical evidence demonstrates that his neurobiological learning theory follows two paths–traumatic and transformative learning. Janik asks us to understand that learning promotes physical brain structure change, and that merging brain development cycles with transformative learning techniques allows the individual to construct knowledge. He also suggests that transformative learning requires discomfort before discovery and reflection, and is strengthened by affective, sensory, and kinesthetic experiences.

The cultural-spiritual view of transformative learning underlies the work of Brooks (2000) and Tisdell (2002, 2008), who share a focus on spiritual awareness and connections between individuals, and cultural and social structures, as well as with positionality. They feel it is through narrative reasoning, or shared storytelling, that individuals socially construct knowledge. This view is similar to Schneider's (2009), who holds that most individuals are sleepwalking through life, and who equates profound transformation to spiritual or existential awakening. The integral or planetary view of transformative learning takes into consideration the greater context and

interconnectedness between systems within our society that extends beyond the individual (Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009; E. W. Taylor, 2008).

While these theoretical divisions are fascinating, I see them as equally relevant to transformative learning experiences and wonder whether or not any paradigmatic distinction is warranted. In fact, I feel that the most fundamental difference with these theories lies with personal versus emancipatory transformation, which distinguishes between change for the individual and change for a marginalized group. I side with the Dalai Lama (2008; 2009) who holds that all change must begin with the individual. Indeed, Cranton and Roy (2003) called for a more holistic view of transformative learning that embraces all paradigms, depending on the context and the individual.

My personal views about transformative learning lean toward the individual, whole-person, constructivist perspectives because I see transformative learning as primarily an internal self-reflective and emotional process, neither necessarily dependent on rational critique, nor on interaction with others, society, or context. In fact, Carter (2002) points out that there are other types of relationships that may be involved in the dialogic processes Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2009) sees as necessary to transformative learning, including those based on: (a) love, which enhances self-image, and includes friendship, (b) memories of others or the deceased, and (c) imagination, which can include self-dialogue or meditation. Nonetheless, I do agree with the transformative learning theorists who feel that a significant or meaningful experience serves as a catalyst.

To this end, my research effort responded to Taylor and Jarecke (2009), who see a need to better identify the cognitive activity of reflection and its practice, including self-

reflection and critical reflection. In particular, I align with the affective, somatic, and intuitive perspectives (K. M. Brown, 2006; Dirkx, 2000, 2001; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Lange, 2004, 2009; E. W. Taylor, 2009) of transformative learning, and hold value in perceiving this important type of learning as a holistic activity that engages the body, emotions, and spirit, as well as the mind. Indeed, viewing the nature of learning as multidimensional recognizes what it requires to learn on a more significant, deeper level, and is a pathway to wisdom, I assert.

**Transformative Learning from Life-Altering Events**

Whether or not interview participants experienced transformative learning is the basic question for my proposed research inquiry, and informs the theory and model I constructed from their descriptions of the learning process involved. Sudden, life-altering events are subjectively defined through diversity in individual perception, and may include job loss, grief, disability, illness, combat, rape, abuse, or natural disaster, as well as positive events, such as childbirth. There is a great body of research within the domain of traditional psychology concerning the negative consequences of trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Although the other side, positive growth from profound events, has been recognized for centuries in religion and nonacademic literature, it has just recently being given attention as a valid area of research and theory in the behavioral sciences. In fact, positive growth following trauma or adversity, also referred to as post-traumatic or stress-related growth, is now an emerging field within psychology and mental health, with increased interest arising from the tragic events of September 11, 2001. This type of positive growth has not been linked with transformative learning theory, which is a connection that I explored with my research inquiry.

Park, Cohen, and Murch (1996) developed a scaled measure of stress-related growth. About the same time, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) developed the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory, which is widely used today. They gathered qualitative data to discern categories of growth in perceptions of Self, relationships, and life philosophies. These clinical psychologists then identified five domains in which to quantitatively measure personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change. They suggest further qualitative study to research this phenomenon, which they call "personal earthquakes." Tedeschi and Calhoun are perhaps the most prolific scholars in the area of positive growth from life-altering events (2006/2009; 2004, 1995; 1998/2008), which they have found is often reported post trauma, albeit only noticed in psychology within the past two decades. To this end, their work focuses on improving psychological support within the realm of mental health. These researchers hold that certain kinds of personality characteristics, such as extraversion, openness to experience, and perhaps optimism, may enable post-traumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun assert that such growth develops through a cognitive process that is subconsciously initiated to cope with profound events that are extremely stressful on both the cognitive and emotional levels.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006/2009; 2004), with Park (1998/2008), are prominent among the few researchers I have found to propose a model that depicts the process of post-traumatic growth. Their linear model involves several steps, including the initial challenges of managing the emotional distress, cognitive processing, which they see as mostly automatic, and intrusive "rumination," which they say is initially more deliberate, and which operates in tandem with a revision of Self-narrative. Asserting that distress is

reduced by self-disclosure and social support, Tedeschi and Calhoun hold that personal resources of self-efficacy, a sense of coherence, meaning making, locus of control, motivation, optimism, cognitive status, hardiness, past experience, and coping style determine the outcome of such an event. Additionally, they identify companion external resources as social support, socioeconomic status, and community. Specifically, what these researchers view as the outcome of this primarily cognitively engaging process are preparedness and resilience. Resilience is defined in various ways, but essentially means returning to a former state of wellbeing after a painful event, which is, by definition, incompatible with the notion of "growth." Consequently, because I am examining the stories of individuals who report growth after a sudden, life-altering event, I do not view resilience as an applicable construct in my study. Of note to my effort, though, Tedeschi and Calhoun relate post-traumatic growth with the development of wisdom. Although these scholar-practitioners' refined model conceptualizes some of the complexity of post-traumatic growth, it focuses on psychological processes, rather than on adult learning, and does not account for the sudden shifts in perspective that can result early on.

With what I perceive as an attempt to expand the most common understanding of resilience as a return to a former state of wellbeing, Lepore and Revenson (2006/2009) discuss what they view are three facets of resilience in response to a stressful life event: recovery, resistance, and reconfiguration, the last of which they equate to post-traumatic growth. In particular, they maintain that resilience is more than a personality trait but, rather, an outcome for some individuals, depending upon past experiences and current life context. This premise points to the complexity involved in attempting to understand what type of individual may or may not experience post-traumatic growth.

Linley and Joseph (2004) offer a review of the developing empirical research in the area of post-traumatic growth, which indicates that problem-focused acceptance, positive reframing, optimism, religion, cognitive processing, and positive affect are consistently associated with such growth. They note inconsistent associations between demographic variables, includng gender, age, education, and income, and psychological distress, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Linley and Joseph critiqued seven instruments designed to measure growth from adversity, including Tedeschi and Calhoun's Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (1995), and assert that the findings indicate individuals who reported and sustained growth over time were less distressed. Linley and Joseph call for longitudinal studies, as well as research on process development, to better understand this type of growth. Furthermore, they suggest future research should discover new variables that contribute to such growth. Lastly, Linley and Joseph stress the need for comprehensive theoretical models that account for mediating and moderating variables.

Linley and Joseph (2008) recently defined a new theory, called "the organismic valuing theory of growth through adversity," along with a model, which are based on the humanistic stance whereby individuals are intrinsically motivated toward growth. Specifically, their theory proposes that an individual moves through a cycle of appraisals, emotional states, coping, and further appraisals, to assimilate within an existing worldview or the existing worldview must accommodate. These researchers note that it is not yet established whether or not post-traumatic growth is one- or multi-dimensional. In Linley and Joseph's view, the most important research questions center on interventions for clinical practice, which is an appropriate focus for psychology and

mental health, but neglects applications for adult learning. Further, they state that growth following adversity refers to psychological wellbeing rather than subjective wellbeing, which is something I contend, after speaking with several individuals who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, and who manifest positive affect and strengthened life satisfaction because of the very event. Furthermore, I equate psychological and subjective wellbeing.

Ford, Tennen, and Albert (2008) refute the entire concept of post-traumatic growth, charging that scales purporting to measure growth from adversity are not reliable. They feel that what appears to be post-traumatic growth may instead be attributed to self-regulation. Specifically, Ford et al. elaborate that growth comes from the changes that are made in an individual's external environment subsequent to a challenging experience, which interrupts patterns of functioning. These researchers call for research to distinguish new beliefs and capacities that differ from previous beliefs and self-regulation, which is what I aimed to do in my inquiry within the framework of transformative learning.

Lechner, Tennen, and Affleck (2009) refer to growth from adverse events as benefit-finding growth, or BFG. Their findings show that some individuals experience a new appreciation of their strengths and resilience, while other individuals report strengthened relationships, greater compassion or altruism, a heightened sense for the fragility of life, or changes in life philosophies and spirituality. Lechner et al. examine how BFG perceptions develop, and whether or not they contribute to adjustment and subsequent quality of life. Noting that BFG still needs conceptualization, they call for better theory and measurement. Likewise, Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (2009) discuss

how little research has been conducted to support the process model proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006/2009; 2004). They review studies that suggest more than one process may be operating, and assert that short-term benefits should be distinguished from long-term growth. Dunn, Uswatte, and Elliott (2009) focus on individuals who report subjective wellbeing and happiness after disability, again mainly for purposes of psychoanalytical therapy within the realm of mental health.

On the one hand, Levine (2008) holds that trauma is the most ignored, denied, avoided, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering. On the other hand, he points out that suffering is viewed as a path to awakening in most spiritual traditions. Levine feels that trauma is about the loss of connection to the Self, physical body, family, others, and the environment. In fact, he feels that trauma is initially physiological, affecting the body and instinct. As one of the few researchers who considers transformation, Levine feels such experience can serve as an emotional and spiritual catalyst, although he notes that an individual's initial response to it may be fight, flight, or paralysis. Taylor (2012) too studied transformation from suffering. His study of 32 individuals found that the majority realized permanent psychological transformation, or new ways of being, which include increased wellbeing, intensified perception, a sense of connection, improved relationships, a less materialistic and more altruistic attitude, decreased negative cognitive activity, and reduced fear of death. He suggests that among the reasons for transformation are the dissolution of psychological attachments that define self-image and acceptance of a changed identity, along with detachment from material possessions, jobs, and traditional life roles. Taylor perceives courage and realism as qualities that may promote transformation from adversity. Aligning with one

of the frameworks I felt was relevant, Taylor holds that many of these individuals' changed characteristics fit into the self-actualization level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943).

Neurobiologist Siegel (2011) speaks of transformational learning as a therapy we can administer to ourselves. What most interests me is that Siegel presents the biology of the brain to include somatic and emotional response, citing evidence that they are intertwined to create mental processes, yet many scholars do not recognize this connection. Siegel refers to integration as the essence of wellbeing and how we connect with others through our mental processes, but he views integration as coming earlier in the transformational process than I believe it does. "Mindsight," Siegel says, can help us compartmentalize during times of crisis, yet help us stay present with our subjective, feeling mind. Using the metaphor of a "mental sea," his working definition of the mind is: "The human mind is a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information" (p. 52). He elaborates that our mind's regulation creates new patterns of energy and information that we monitor and modify, which is the essence of our subjective realities. Siegel claims that we can learn to shape these patterns, alter our mind and, thereby, our brain, by first seeing the mind clearly (i.e., "mindsight"). Indeed, by viewing mind, brain, and relationships as the three fundamental dimensions of our reality, we can perceive our human experience with transformed eyes, according to Siegel. He notes that many Self-states are organized around our motivational drives, which relates to Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs (1943).

I have struggled with a personal insight that individuals are on different levels, or planes, of understanding in life, but have normally seen or heard it expressed as

"spirituality," although that concept did not seem to me to quite "fit." Kegan (1994), who promotes epistemological change in perceptions and interpretations, expresses this understanding well, as awareness and development. He asserts that the central task for most adults involves mastering the higher levels of consciousness. Kauffman (2002) discusses the emerging mental health field of traumatology where the focus is on theoretical practice applied to grieving, and connects a loss of innate assumptions, which he calls our "assumptive world," with traumatic grief. What Kauffman is describing is a break in the cognitive ordering that individuals conceptually build to help make sense out of changed assumptions. He asserts that we are psychologically unprepared for trauma because our fundamental assumptions about the world and ourselves, which provide faith, meaning, and self-worth, give us a sense of invulnerability. In other words, we may recognize that bad things happen, but we believe our world is good and safe. This scholar points out that trauma brings with it an existential confrontation with mortality, whether or not it is real or symbolic and, thus, with our fragility, and calls this a "psychic wound." Kauffman also speaks of wisdom born from such experiences, and notes that good outcomes have only recently been addressed in research and practice.

Lost or "shattered" assumptions is a core metaphor for traumatic loss, used by Kauffman (2002), Janoff-Bulman (1992), and others. Exploring how individuals carry on after adversity, Janoff-Bulman (1992), holds that three fundamental assumptions underlie our life philosophies: the world is benevolent and meaningful, and the Self is worthy. Similar to Kauffman, she bases her premise on what she sees as our "positively biased" fundamental assumptions, which are formed in childhood and adolescence, and which become abstract and general, or are least likely to change. Janoff-Bulman maintains that

the process of learning involves changing our conceptual systems, but charges that such change is rare, and is generally a lengthy, gradual process, which is compatible with Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1991, 1997, 2009). This scholar feels such change involves events that cause psychological trauma, for which we are unprepared, and sees great anxiety as an outcome. Perhaps most important, Janoff-Bulman states that individuals who experience such adversity exhibit minimal negative changes in self-views, whereby coping involves restructuring fundamental cognitive schemas in the face of breakdown and cognitive-emotional disintegration. She notes that revised self- and worldviews are surprisingly positive. In this search for equilibrium, basic assumptions are consciously re-established in small, manageable parts through a creative process of denial or "turning off," which may take weeks, months, or years. Also in this adjustment process is interplay between the cognitive and the emotional, or the rational and experiential, she says, along a path to a "poignant" wisdom. Janoff-Bulman charges that interpretations focused on benefits and lessons learned creates perceptions that a traumatic event is a worthwhile teacher. Lastly, she notes that evidence for resilience is greater than realized, and holds that talking, discussing, venting, and sharing provide opportunities to assist with healing.

I disagree with Janoff-Bulman that the emotional is not rational, and go further to say that learning enables change, which may or may not involve fundamental assumptions. I do feel that adversity can "shake up" or may even invalidate assumptions, but do not agree that her list of fundamental assumptions holds for all, nor that adversity always affects individuals in this manner. If you agree with attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1977), our most innate assumptions

are formed early on. I identify the most fundamental assumption essentially as, "I am loved," "I am not loved," or "I am loved some of the time." Experiential learning and/or reflective questioning throughout our lives may or may not change this deepest assumption, which forms the basis for all our ensuing assumptions that are informed by contextual social learning, and manifest in our behavior. I maintain that life-altering events affect these later, internal assumptions, but are probably not a catalyst of change for this earliest innate assumption involving our self-worth. One of my pilot study interview participants expressed that he learned affirmation of the Self from his sudden, life-altering event. Nonetheless, I do not believe that this validation erased his innate belief that he was loved "some of the time." Rather, I see this process as more of a turning toward more reliance on the Self and learning Self-love, along with the ability to unprioritize this early message from others.

Of particular interest to my inquiry, Miller and C'de Baca (2001) qualitatively studied what they termed, "quantum change," which they define as sudden transformational change that comes unexpectedly to some individuals, and which they found was more common than they had thought. Distinguishing between "sudden insights" and "mystical epiphanies," these psychologists found that all 55 of their participants felt their sudden, powerful change was overall a positive experience. Miller and C'de Baca speculate that this phenomenon might be neglected in research because such experiences are difficult to describe and, thus, individuals are reluctant to discuss them, feeling as though they are unique in having this type of experience. Noting, as I have, that most of the literature on transformation addresses gradual change evolving from learning and maturity, Miller and C'de Baca point to the fact that "quantum change"

has been historically and commonly presented in the humanities. Mentioning religious conversion and the domain of theology as the closest scholarly applications, these researchers assert that quantum change is a much larger phenomenon, altering how an individual behaves, feels, thinks, and experiences reality. Typically, they say, individuals vividly remember the often very emotional experience, which has a distinct beginning, although often a less clear ending, yet the transformative change that occurs is sudden and profound. Correspondingly, my pilot study survey results indicated 65.1 percent of the 186 respondents report having had a sudden, life-altering event.

Several years after first researching "quantum change," Miller (2004) remains convinced that the phenomenon is real and not so rare, yet we still know little about this type of change that differs from the usual incremental type. He notes that it is as though "quantum changers had experienced a fast-forward in what Maslow described as self-actualization," and ponders if quantum change is in fact an "evolution in consciousness" (pp. 458-459). In a follow-up of the participants ten years later, C'de Baca and Wilbourne (2004) found that none described a return to old ways of being. Further, they found these individuals' rapid transformation included permanent personality change that encompassed actions, emotions, and cognitive processes, or permanent personality change. While Miller and C'de Baca's (2004; 2001) significant research is relevant to my study, they are examining change from a psychological perspective that results suddenly and is not necessarily triggered by a life-altering event. Furthermore, these scholars do not reference transformative adult learning.

In sum, the adult learning theoretical frameworks of cognitivism, social learning, humanism, and, in particular, transformative learning theory informed my study. With a

transdisciplinary approach, I integrated these frameworks with constructs from positive psychology, covered in the following literature.

## Positive Psychology

One of my primary intentions with this inquiry was to examine in depth whether or not a sudden, life-altering event was perceived by individuals who reported this experience as, overall, a positive or negative learning event. Just as much of the emerging research on post-traumatic growth is revealing, as well as all the learning theories that view a transformational event as a positive, growth process, the individuals I informally spoke with and interviewed in my pilot study emphatically emphasized that their experience had positive outcomes. Specifically, 73.5 percent of the 117 respondents who completed my pilot study survey questions about this indicated that they perceive their experience as a positive learning event.

A relatively new domain within the social sciences, positive psychology evolved from Maslow's concept of "health and growth psychology" (1968/1999), and is attributed to Dr. Martin Seligman, a former president of the American Psychological Association who currently serves as Director of the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Center. Positive psychology is concerned with the empirical study of positive emotions, character strengths, and wellbeing (Seligman, 2002, 2011).

Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide a framework for the scientific study of what they call "signature" attributes in individuals, classifying 24 character strengths under the six historically and culturally universal virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. The nonprofit Values in Action (VIA) Institute on Character (Anonymous, 2011a) serves to advance the science and practice of character

development by providing free VIA surveys, which measure these strengths and virtues as individual differences. The VIA premise is that knowing our strengths helps us understand, nurture, and express what is right with us, versus focusing on correcting our deficits. Our signature strengths are unique to each of us, define our essence, and frame our decisions, preferences, and behaviors. Thus, positive psychology maintains that building and expressing our strengths enhances meaning, authenticity, and quality of life (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011). Further, as the basic building blocks of "goodness," these positive psychologists hold that character strengths can change from life events, lifestyle change, and intervention. I chose not to administer any strengths assessments to my participants but I did ask some of them what they felt their inherent strengths are, and whether or not they felt these strengths changed because of the event they experienced. My interest here is to examine what specific strengths these individuals perceive are part of their character, and whether or not the event might have had any an impact on these qualities.

Seligman (2011) recently proposed a new positive psychology and theory to encompass more factors for what he believes are necessary for a meaningful life. He defines such a life as one that consists of belonging to and serving something larger than the Self, or self-transcendence, which parallels Maslow's sixth motivational level (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Seligman sees flourishing in live as involving happiness, flow, meaning, love, gratitude, accomplishment, growth, and good relationships. To this end, he posits that appropriate measures examine positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment (PERMA), with the 24 strengths underlying these elements. Seligman asserts that individuals are wise to choose a course in life that

maximizes the PERMA elements by building and expressing their signature strengths. I hoped to discover whether or not there was any correlation between these PERMA strengths and what my participants reported.

Several positive psychologists (Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Peterson, Park, Pole, D'Andrea, & Seligman, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) report small, positive associations between traumatic events and several cognitive and interpersonal character strengths, concluding that growth following trauma may involve a building of character, as hypothesized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, 1995). Investigating both character strengths and life satisfaction with the VIA inventory and Tedeschi and Calhoun's Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (1995), Peterson et al. (2008) note the abundance of theories that emphasize the negative effects of adversity. They also observe that, although post-traumatic growth is now being reported in psychological research, it remains controversial because measurement is typically through self-report instruments.

Positive psychologist Fredrickson (2001; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003) seeks, as I do, to better understand the factors that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and societies. Her broaden-and-build theory (2001) supposes that positive emotions increase attention and cognition, which, in turn, build personal resources—ranging from the physical and intellectual, to the social and psychological—and initiate "upward spirals" that increase emotional wellbeing. Fredrickson feels that emotions are discrete and temporary, whereas affect is longer lasting, and varies along the dimensions of positive and negative emotional activation. Positive affect, according to numerous theorists she notes, facilitates approach and inquiring behaviors, continued

action, or engagement. Specifically, Fredrickson cites experiments that found individuals who experience positive affect show thought patterns that are notably unusual, flexible, creative, and integrative, prefer variety, and are more open-minded and efficient. Fredrickson holds that her findings suggest positive emotions improve the ways individuals cope with adversity and may underlie resilience, physiological undoing, and cognitive broadening outcomes. Like Fredrickson, I too ponder whether or not positive affect can be taught, and see implications for learning and praxis from those who have experienced sudden, life-altering events.

Burns et al. (2008) attempted to replicate and extend empirical support for Frederickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001). Debating if upward spirals might be partially due to changes in the dopamine neurotransmitter, they found that positive affect (PA) and positive coping mutually build on one another, as did PA and trust, but PA did not demonstrate an upward spiral correlation with social support. These findings, along with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001), suggest that experiencing positive emotions accrues personal resources that can function as reserves during crisis. Accruing personal resources suggests that positive emotions may promote longevity, and provides reason to build and value positive experiences, Burns et al. maintain, which has implications for my study. Further, I suggest that accruing such personal resources may coincide with learning and positive growth from negative life events.

Noting that benefits found in the aftermath of crisis has been little studied, Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2006) examined character strengths related to recovery in a study of over 2000 adults. They note that common cultural scripts lead individuals to identify themselves as survivors and biases perceptions in the aftermath of crisis. They

cite Brickman and Campbell's concept of the hedonic treadmill (1971), which implies that people automatically return to a biologically determined set-point of affectivity. However, Peterson et al. perceive an issue with this interpretation, in that it overlooks the fact that an individual's character may change after crisis. They found associations between physical illness and the character strengths of beauty, bravery, curiosity, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, humor, kindness, love of learning, and spirituality. These scholars suggest that recovery from illness and psychological disorder may correlate with greater character strengths, and which may contribute to renewed life satisfaction, and suggest that interventions to build strengths may help individuals flourish following crisis.

Self-efficacy and wisdom are two character strengths in particular that emerged as potentially important in my pilot study inquiry, which I address in more depth next. Other significant virtues and character strengths may also surface in common with my participants.

**Self-Efficacy**

One of the character strengths that I specifically asked participants about was self-efficacy. Adult learning theorist Bandura (1994) is credited with expanding our awareness of this strength, which he defines as an individual's belief about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that have an impact on events in their lives. He holds that these beliefs determine how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes. Further, Bandura states that high self-efficacy enhances one's sense of accomplishment and wellbeing.

**Wisdom**

In my informal discussions and pilot study interviews with individuals who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, I heard some speak of gaining wisdom as an outcome of the event. Others appeared not to see it, or even denied it. I view the philosophical domain and positive psychology virtue of wisdom as closely related to both transformative learning and the construct of self-transcendence. Bleyl (2001, 2009) also perceives a connection between transformative learning and wisdom, in that her research found this relationship between those who were deemed by their peers to be wise. I do not necessarily agree, however, with Bleyl's suggestion that wisdom may represent completion of the life-stage development process. In her interviews with 19 individuals nominated as being wise by their peers, Bleyl (2009) identified the following characteristics in common:

- They are grateful
- They live disciplined and principled lives
- They are honed by adversity
- They thirst for knowledge and understanding
- They exhibit discernment and good judgment
- They have uncommon common sense
- They are reflective and introspective
- They exemplify self-sufficiency
- They seek balance in all things
- They are altruistic and seek the common good
- They are humble (pp. 265-268)

Most of these qualities appeared to be in common with the individuals I spoke with and interviewed. In fact, when I asked them if their event had given them wisdom, they modestly shunned the question, just as Bleyl (2009) found her participants did.

Similarly, Allison (2006, 2007) associates wisdom with loss and adversity in general, as experienced during the natural course of life. Noting that much of the literature on wisdom alludes to or mentions loss, adversity, and suffering, Allison connects these phenomena as catalysts leading to transformative learning, which she posits may be what distinguishes the wise. As previously mentioned, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006/2009; 2004) include wisdom as an outcome in their model of post-traumatic growth. They maintain that individuals who have faced major challenge may also develop the ability to balance reflection and action, weigh the known and unknown, be better able to accept the paradoxes of life, and more openly address existential questions of human experience, all of which are generally associated with the characteristic of wisdom.

Wisdom is a virtue that is highly valued in many cultures outside of the U.S. (Hall, 2010), and is one of the six overarching virtues Peterson and Seligman (2004) identify as consistent across history and culture. They classify wisdom as a character strength found in some individuals that enhances what they call "the good life," which is a foundational wellbeing concept within positive psychology.

In sum, with its strengths-based approach to learning and change, positive psychology attracts me, and clearly relates to the unique approach transformative learning scholar Lange (2004, 2009) favors. Thus far, positive psychology has stressed quantitative research over qualitative, with the quantitative research conducted largely

through measures of self-reported attitudes, feelings, and perceptions at one point in time. With this type of research, an individual's self-assessment may differ depending on their frame of mind at the time of assessment. Moreover, individuals may confer differing meanings to instrument constructs. I maintain that it is difficult, at best, to reliably measure subjective emotions, feelings, and behaviors through self-report assessment. My preference is to address the gaps in the literature by delving into a larger, more in-depth examination of a few individuals through the more extensive process of qualitative inquiry.

## Filling the Gap

Although positive growth from profound events has been recognized for centuries in religion and non-academia, it is just recently being given attention as a valid area for research and theory within the behavioral sciences. In fact, positive growth following trauma or adversity, also referred to as post-traumatic or stress-related growth, is now an emerging field within psychology and mental health. With any new area of study, there is much to be discovered. Indeed, this type of positive change has not been linked with transformative learning theory, which was a connection that I wished to explore and conceptualize with my research inquiry.

Furthermore, many adult learning scholars and theorists (Allison, 2007; Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2009) describe the phenomenon of transformative change as a rational, incremental process that evolves gradually over a lifetime. Like Miller and C'de Baca (2001), I hold that transformative change can occur suddenly, which has not been specifically examined by adult learning scholars, to my knowledge. To this end, I assert that a better understanding of this important type of learning that seemingly results after a

sudden, life-altering event is a potential contribution to adult learning, as well as the emerging interest in growth from adversity within the fields of psychology and mental health. I proposed to cultivate this better understanding through of the use of a grounded theory methodological framework, for which I present the applicable literature next.

## Grounded Theory Methodological Frameworks

I relate with Guba and Lincoln (1985), who promote organic, interpretive, qualitative research methodologies that incorporate the perspectives of multiple realities. They assert that facts and values are interdependent, and that the role of the teacher and learner should be reciprocal, which are concepts I incorporate in my research efforts. Qualitative research is an adventure for the researcher, embracing the unknown and offering the potential for serendipity in a discovery learning process (Bruner, 1961). This relativist, interpretivist form of discovery learning honors multiple realities, and is led by open-ended research questions that guide the researcher in examining participants' lived experiences and subjective interpretations by emphasizing a natural process and setting. For this reason, it is referred to as "naturalistic" inquiry (Glesne, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Whereas quantitative research focuses on identifying those averages that fall within the normal bell curve, qualitative research can be a means for highlighting the voices of the "outliers." For me, as a researcher, this process is predicated in compassion and active listening on my part, in an egalitarian relationship with my participants that affords reciprocal learning and growth.

To answer my research questions through my researcher positioning, my methodology followed a grounded theory approach to focus on the fundamental process that frames a phenomenon (Willig, 2008). I conceive of the grounded theory process as a

truly organic methodology, in that it begins to grow from the seed that is planted with the initial participant's story and continues to develop with each successive participant as the researcher waters the seedling, until the mature plant blossoms into a theory of beauty and originality. As a humanist, I am drawn to such a discovery, constructivist, and affective approach of interpretive data analysis, which necessitates induction, deduction, comparison, and reconstruction. With induction, the researcher moves from the particular to the general, or from the detailed descriptive to a more abstract conceptual level (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Cresswell (2007) noted that grounded theory is a viable methodology to use when theory is not available to explain a process or phenomenon. In my review of the literature, I found a lack of theory in the topic I am examining, which is an emerging area of research. Consequently, I situated my exploratory study as a grounded theory analysis with a primary research goal of developing theory and a model that may help better explain the core learning process for adults who have experienced a self-described sudden, life-altering event. According to Maxwell (2005), useful theory helps clarify and explain a phenomenon. Thus, theory is not simply a framework but, also, an enlightening "story" about what is happening and why. In the research study I am conducted, the phenomenon was not an external social process but, rather, an internal, individual one. With grounded theory, hypotheses are inductively and reflexively created during the process of simultaneously interacting with your inquiry and data analysis. The intention is for these hypotheses to gradually lead to theory. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) note that abductive reasoning, or inference, is involved, wherein the researcher considers multiple explanations before forming hypotheses to confirm and/or disconfirm the phenomenon.

Thus, as I looked within to interpret my participants' stories, I created a new story here that I hope will broaden our understanding of sudden, life-altering events.

Glesne (2010) discusses how Strauss and Glaser (1967) originated grounded theory research with a realist orientation and a positivist ontological approach as a methodology for developing theory that emerges from theoretically sampled data through constant comparison and memo-writing, rather than from preconceived hypotheses. This dynamic approach was developed when other qualitative methods were considered unscientific (Morse et al., 2009). Although the emergent inductive approach, now called Glaserian grounded theory analysis, is still practiced, grounded theory analysis has since developed into other divergent approaches, advanced by Strauss and Corbin (2008) and Charmaz (2002, 2009), respectively. Strauss and Corbin's (2008) both inductive and deductive version of grounded theory advocates technical and structural analytical procedures, rather than emphasizing the comparative methods that distinguished the original grounded theory approach. For example, they advocate creating a conditional or consequential matrix. Charmaz (2002, 2009), promotes a relativist, pragmatic, constructivist approach. For traditional Glaserians, theory comes last (Glaser, 1998). For Strauss and Corbin, theory and data analysis are simultaneous (Mason, 2007).

Kelle (2005) noted issues of debate by grounded theorists, including: (a) the role of induction, wherein prescriptive procedures and structured coding frameworks require deduction, such as Strauss and Corbin's (2008) axial coding technique, which involves reconstructing new connections with the data after open coding, and (b) discovery versus construction. Charmaz (2002, 2009) argues that categories and theory do not emerge from the data but are constructed through interacting with the data and the practice of

reflexivity in an active, sometimes emotional process that is not neutral but, rather, influenced by the researcher's positionality. As I see it, the grounded theory process involves both discovery and construction, throughout. First, the qualitative researcher creates their research questions and then structures the appropriate methodological approach. The researcher then sets out on a methodological journey to discover the data that responds to their research questions. From the gathered data, the qualitative researcher codes, analyzes, and constructs theory or interpretations, or a new story for better understanding.

With the grounded theory method, which interactively merges both data collection and analysis, data analysis begins from the first observation or interview (Hood, 2007). According to Charmaz (2002, 2009), the process commences with an initial research question that descriptively identifies the phenomenon of interest but does not make any assumptions. Further, she recommends that the research question involves activities and processes, rather than states or conditions. Grounded theorists study the data early on, and aggregate, compare, and organize it through the technique of open coding, which involves labeling segments of data to conceptualize its meaning. Charmaz views grounded theory as a set of flexible, guiding principles and practices, not as a methodological prescription. She distinguishes two types of coding: (a) initial line-by-line coding that crystallizes meaning and ideas, and (b) focused coding, which helps separate, sort, and synthesize large amounts of data throughout the entire process. Additionally, Charmaz recommends writing notes, or memos, to develop ideas. The full process includes reflection, memo-writing, and diagramming (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) during data collection to formulate and integrate comparative analyses. As

questions arise and gaps in the analysis appear, the researcher theoretically and purposively returns to the sample pool to collect more data, guided by what the developing theory indicates. In fact, Charmaz (2009) conceives of analysis as a spiraling process that becomes more theoretical and conceptual through successive review and comparison, eventually developing into a grounded theory or understanding of the studied phenomenon.

## Summary

Reviewing and evaluating the literature is important to acquire an understanding of a proposed research topic, what inquiry has already been done, how such inquiry was conducted, what was learned, and what unknown issues remain (Hart, 1998). Nonetheless, Corbin and Strauss (2008) point out that there is no need to review all of the literature before conducting research because it is impossible to know what constructs will emerge from the data. I see this as being particularly true with a grounded theory approach, which is the methodology I used. Rather, the literature offers a range of perspectives and theories that I considered in formulating my tentative interview questions (see Appendix E), as a conceptual beginning for my pilot study and dissertation inquiry. I triangulated some of these viewpoints in my data analysis.

Scaffolding on the literature I reviewed herein and my personal interest, which inspired my study, I saw several gaps that my inquiry can attempt to address within this mostly uncharted area of adult learning from sudden change. To this end, I uniquely used a trans-disciplinary, organic, humanistic, and strengths-based approach within a grounded theory methodological framework to lay the foundation for better understanding of learning from a sudden, life-altering event. It is my hope that deeper understanding will

lead to implications for a more meaningful and better quality of adult life. In the next chapter, I present the methodological design for my inquiry.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter covers the design I proposed for my dissertation research, with details about the specific methods I used to collect and analyze data, led by my own modification to the grounded theory framework. Included in this methodological plan is a discussion on ethical considerations and what I perceived were the limitations with this study as proposed. I begin, however, with a review of my research questions.

## Research Questions

My methodology was guided by my holistic epistemological stance and my research questions, which were primarily of a qualitative nature. To review, the overarching research question I examined through theoretical interviewing with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2002, 2009; Glesne, 2010; Maxwell, 2005) was:

- What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event?

To develop this primary research question, I proposed the following three sub-questions:

- What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event?
- Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why?
- What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event?

Data collection and methods of analysis are predicated by the research questions, which inform a researcher's chosen methodology. Table A1 in Appendix A is a planning

matrix I adapted from Maxwell's (2005) model, which relates these research questions to the data collection and analysis methods I used, as well as to what I sought to better understand with this inquiry. These methods are described in detail in this chapter, following a description of my modification to the grounded theory methodological framework, which I felt was appropriate for my particular exploratory study.

## Holistic Grounded Theory

Denzin (2010) presupposes, "There is no one way to do interpretive, qualitative inquiry" (p. 15). Although I favor and followed in part Charmaz' approach to grounded theory analysis, I took the liberty to propose a different, extended path for my methodology. As such, I gathered a large quantity of data through an extensive interview process. I feel that the more rich data you can collect, the better the understanding of what it is you are studying. Moreover, I see such diversity as contributing to theory generation. Thus, I am calling my extended approach, holistic grounded theory. In true grounded theory fashion, described as the "full version" by Willig (2008), I collected data from a participant, explored the data through initial, line-by-line open coding, established themes and relationships, and returned more informed to the sample pool to purposively gather data from a successive participant. In contrast to what most grounded theorists describe, however, I assert that continuously refining my theory with each consecutive participant's story mandates in-depth data collection from every interviewee, rather than gathering less and less data each time. With this more holistic approach, I did no narrowing of focus. After I collected all of my data, I applied Charmaz' focused coding technique (2002, 2009) to sort and compare the initial open coding work, writing organizational memos to synthesize these results.

In short, I essentially merged a grounded theory approach with basic, interpretive qualitative analysis as defined by Merriam (2009) to focus on meaning, better understanding, and process, with theory and model generation grounded in the data, to help conceptualize the adult learning process my participants experienced. Next, I present details on the specific methods I used for data collection and analysis within this modified, more extensive, holistic grounded theory framework.

## Methods of Data Collection

My study involved intangible concepts that represent multiple, complex social realities, in that each individual experiences, perceives, feels, and manifests them uniquely. Inquiry into such subjective areas requires attention to behaviors, attitudes, assumptions, language, emotions, and symbolic displays during data collection to better understand each research case holistically. Herein are the specific strategies I used in the data collection process, beginning with sample selection.

### Sample Selection

The population for this exploratory research was difficult to define because of the nature of the event I wished to examine. Indeed, it involved events in people's lives that are not typically shared. Although such events have been widely described in literature and depicted in the arts, as well as noted by the few researchers who have studied them (W. R. Miller, 2004; William R. Miller & C'de Baca, 2001) as being more common than most people think, they have not been backed up with research. Thus, although I was able to define my targeted population as adults in the United States who felt that they had experienced a sudden, life-altering learning event, the size of this population remains largely unknown.

**Survey instrument.** The grounded theory method is uniquely compatible with a wide range of data collection techniques. While emphasis for this study was on qualitative research methodology, I selected participants to interview from the targeted population with the use of a brief, self-designed, online survey instrument, which I created and released in my pilot study. Hesse-Biber (2010) notes that using a quantitative method to obtain a representative, yet purposive sample can enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative findings and locate difficult-to-find participants.

I designed my survey instrument using the online tool, *Opinio*, a comprehensive application to create, publish, analyze, and maintain surveys. The survey included a total of nine questions, and branched to the end when a respondent did not agree to completing the survey or did not feel that they had experienced a sudden, life-altering event in their lifetime. Most of the questions were dichotomous or categorical, but there were two 7-point Likert-scale items, whereby the respondent could rate the degree to which they felt their sudden, life-altering experience resulted in positive or negative outcomes.

After agreeing to take the survey, the initial question asked participants if they felt that they had experienced a sudden, life-changing event, wherein they changed their perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event. If a respondent reported that they had not experienced such an event, they were taken to the end of the survey. When a respondent reported that they had experienced such an event, they were then asked to rate how they felt about the event, on a scale ranging from 1, strongly disagree, to 7, strongly agree. Two evaluative questions assessed these feelings. The first inquired as to whether or not the respondent felt that their life-changing event was, overall, a positive event, in that it

resulted in positive, long-term outcomes. A corresponding question asked whether or not they felt that their life-changing event was, overall, a negative event. The respondent was then asked their gender, and their age range when they experienced the event. After that, the respondent was asked how long ago they experienced the event. The next survey question informed those respondents who met the selection criteria about the qualitative piece of this proposed study and invited them to voluntarily participate. If they agreed, they were then asked to provide only their first name and a phone number or email for further contact. This survey is shown in Appendix C.

In the pilot study phase I conducted in the latter part of 2011 and Spring of 2012, I offered the survey widely to a population consisting of my personal and professional contacts across the U.S. through the use of word-of-mouth, Facebook,[6] LinkedIn,[7] list-serves, and e-mail, informing them that I am a PhD student beginning inquiry into my dissertation topic. Additionally, I promoted a "snowball effect" to enhance randomness and reach by encouraging respondents to share the survey link with people they knew. I initially estimated that my sample target for this effort would comprise approximately 100 total respondents, wherein I could select candidates for in-depth interviewing from those who met the criteria and volunteered for further participation. In fact, I received over 200 respondents, and had a pool of nearly 60 volunteers from which to purposively select participants for further interviews with the dissertation inquiry, permission for which was a component of the IRB approval. (Please refer to Appendix B for the IRB approval letter.) Along with the use of this survey to enhance sample selection

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[6] Facebook is a social networking service offered on the Internet. In 2010, 500 million people around the world were actively using Facebook to stay connected with friends, family, and professional contacts (Zuckerberg, 2010). Participation is reputed to be 900 million as of 2012.

[7] LinkedIn is the largest business-related social online network where individuals can establish professional contacts.

credibility, I triangulated this additional quantitative data with the qualitative findings. In light of the response to my pilot study survey, I proposed and was granted permission not to continue to promote the survey any further during the dissertation phase.

**Data Collection Process**

The selection criteria for my interview sample targeted adult volunteers in the U.S. who designated in the survey that they had experienced what they perceived to be a sudden, life-altering event. For my interview sampling strategy, I purposively selected one survey respondent at a time from the pool of volunteers who reported having experienced different types of life-changing events and expressed interest in volunteering 2 to 5 hours of their time to be interviewed. With each person selected, I completed a one- or two-part, in-depth interview with them, and initially analyzed their data before moving on to interview the next participant. Mason (2007) refers to organic sampling as a process that develops throughout the research effort, which is how I viewed the practice I followed in the grounded theory tradition. Thus, interviewing a subsequent individual was influenced by what I learned from the previous participants. Such continuous theoretical sampling is perhaps one of the significant differences with the grounded theory method, wherein the researcher interviews and analyzes one participant at a time, using the knowledge gleaned from each participant to inform what is asked with the next. In other words, theory generation begins with the data collected from the first participant, and guides the next interview. In light of this process, predetermined interview questions were not always relevant because my inquiry was dependent on what was emerging from the collection of data. Appendix E lists the tentative interview questions I conceived to

guide my inquiry, which were informed by my research questions, a review of what I viewed as potentially relevant literature, and my pilot study.

Participation in the pilot study involved one or two semi-structured, one- to one-and a half-hour interview sessions. For the initial interviews, I conducted two sessions. As my focus narrowed some as trends were emerging, I began theorizing and, thus, was able to complete data collection in one session. Because the sample originated from across the U.S., I interviewed most of the participants using the Skype "phone" application on my computer. I collected the data with a digital voice recorder during the phone sessions, as well as with the *Transcribe!* computer application's record function for backup. I used this same *Transcribe!* application to listen to interview recordings at a variable speed as I personally transcribed each interview. Along the way, my participants and I had more phone and e-mail conversations, wherein I asked additional questions based on my initial open-coding review of the data after transcription, and, later in the process, for member checking.

**Sample size.** Creswell (2007) suggests that the point of theoretical data saturation may involve sampling 20 to 30 participants or 50 to 60 hours of interviewing. Conversely, Stern (2007) maintains that this point may be achieved with only 20 to 30 interview hours. I proposed an in-depth qualitative inquiry involving 10 to 15 participants in total. In fact, I interviewed 16 participants. I feel that in many aspects pertaining to the information I sought, I reached the point of theoretical saturation as clear patterns and commonalities emerged. Indeed, I did serendipitously discover as I moved through the data collection process that similar, substantive themes were repeated by most of the participants and, in fact, attained what I feel was theoretical saturation.

Two of my participants were what I might call "outliers," in that they did not really conform to the criteria. However, I collected data from them to strengthen my emerging theory and interpretations. Note that this total sample included the five participants I interviewed in the pilot study phase. Nonetheless, the total hours of interviewing and follow-up with this sample size was approximately 60, including follow-up interviews, which was in line with Creswell's larger recommendation. Indeed, I found in the pilot study phase that interviewing, transcribing, and analyzing each participant required approximately one month of full-time effort. In any case, the ultimate purpose of this inquiry was to explore all of my research questions in detail, and not merely to produce a theory and model grounded in the data.

**Consent and Security**

My pilot study survey contained an initial consent explanation, wherein 197 of the 205 respondents agreed to participate. For those five whom I selected in this first phase to interview more in depth from the pool of nearly 60 individuals who volunteered, I read them the IRB-approved verbal consent script, given in Appendix D**.** This process ensured that interviewees were well informed about what their participation would involve, to which they could agree or disagree**.** I proceeded with an initial interview upon receipt of a participant's verbal consent. Also upon receipt of their verbal consent, I logged the date and participant's name and contact info, and then immediately assigned them a pseudonym, which is what I used to refer to them in all succeeding data collection. The log and consent forms were retained on my password-protected computer, which was kept in my home office and regularly backed up on an external hard drive I kept securely offsite.

I felt that the sources for data collection that I used as described herein for my dissertation study provided me with a broad base of rich information to triangulate, compare, and interpret. Next, I describe the methods I used for data analysis.

## Methods of Analysis

Descriptive statistics are commonly used to organize and summarize large amounts of categorical data (Holcomb, 1998). With the small pilot study I conducted, simple counts and percentages sufficiently compared and described the survey data I gathered, which I present in table and chart form in Appendix G without any corresponding interpretation at this point. Emphasis was on my methods of analysis for the qualitative data I collected, described here as the primary focus of my inquiry.

Grounded theory is both a methodological framework for theory generation and a guiding method for data analysis. With the grounded theory approach, data analysis begins from the first observation or interview (Hood, 2007), and centers on conceptual-level data. According to Charmaz (2002, 2009), grounded theorists study the data early on, and aggregate, compare, and organize it through an extensive technique of openly coding everything, which involves labeling segments of data to abstract meaning. Coding is, thus, a central process with this method. Indeed, line-by-line, open coding ensures that the analysis is rich in depth and truly grounded in the data.

Specifically, the qualitative analysis approach I proposed and used followed a post-modern, constructivist, multi-phase coding scheme. First, I analyzed each case inductively, openly coding from the transcripts by marking key *in vivo* codes (Creswell, 2007), passages, and *emic* concepts taken from the participants' own words (Maxwell, 2005), to avoid imposing any existing theory or framework. I then condensed portions of

the coded transcripts into synopses, or memos, which I termed "Your Story," to organize some of the most meaningful data. I offered the stories and transcripts to each participant with the data that I determined was important to focus on highlighted for rigorous member checking (Emerson et al., 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Similarly, I grouped and organized by differences and similarities the *emic* concepts and *in vivo* codes to begin coding in a more focused manner as I analyzed the data deductively across the individual cases within an Excel taxonomy (LeCompte, 2000). Eventually, I drew out the overarching themes and subthemes at a more abstract, analytical level.

To assist with my data analysis, I considered using *Dedoose*, which is a web application that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative analyses. With its many capabilities, including memo writing and axial coding, this tool facilitates exploring research data from multiple perspectives, enhancing efficiency, reliability, validity, interpretability, and presentation of research findings. I found this application to be limiting for the volume of data I collected, and the technology made me feel "distanced" from the collective voices of the participants. In the end, I relied on the more "manual" tools of the researcher's journal and my coding taxonomy. The coding taxonomy accommodated large blocks of text and was easily customizable. Furthermore, the taxonomy allowed me to move sections around easily to establish and connect patterns and themes.

Overall, I analyzed my data both during and after collection and transcription in a myriad of open-ended ways, including reflecting, diagramming, tabling, and writing notes in my research journal on concepts, themes, and interpretations as they emerged.

Refining as I proceeded with collecting the data, I conceptualized, coded, and framed, comparing and reframing themes in a circular process between the emerging codes and the data, seeking patterns, connections, commonalities, and differences. Furthermore, I triangulated the different cases or bodies of individual's stories with each other, as well as with the relevant literature I reviewed and the quantitative data I collected in my pilot study. During this analysis process, I axially compared the data, in conjunction with diagramming the process of adult learning that emerged, to inform my basic, substantive-level (Creswell, 2007) theory generation that was grounded, or based on, the data. An example of the coding and comparison taxonomy I prepared using Microsoft's Excel software application is given in Appendix F.

Moving back and forth while comparing and triangulating the data I gathered, I constantly modified and refined my emerging theory and model, which I documented in organizational and conceptual memos in my journal and on my computer. According to Hood (2007), memo-writing is an important part of grounded theory method to describe substantive findings, provide definitions and hierarchies of themes, justify the abstract, higher-level grouping codes you chose, explore relationships, and track changes in direction. Whereas I relied on journaling for the majority of my reflexivity, which led to emerging interpretive and theoretical results, memos provided both backup and background for my developing theory and model. Journaling was my tool of choice for conceptualizing and diagramming the developing model, as well. My interpretation process is described in more detail next.

## Interpreting the Data

Interpreting and theorizing from the data I collected involved extensive reflecting and conceptualizing during coding and analysis about what I was learning from each successive participant to determine themes from reoccurring patterns. To enhance my awareness, reflexivity, and reflection during this research journey, I kept a journal to question and memo my thoughts, feelings, progress, and hurdles along the way. Repeatedly framing, conceptualizing, and analyzing the data as it emerges, in grounded theory fashion, assisted me in grasping the essence of what I wished to learn and share from this exploratory study. Diagramming these themes and patterns helped me understand the essence of the phenomenon experienced by my participants. In developing abstract themes, I was able to discover their natural relationship to my participants' learning experience, thus conceptualizing an ordered process. I integrated and triangulated the pertinent literature with the survey and qualitative data at various levels, including knowledge and explanation (Mason, 2007). Out of this integration, findings emerged from my interpretations of the participants' stories that are based on both commonalities and differences, and which informed the preliminary grounded theory and model I finally present later to describe the phenomenon of adult learning from a sudden, life-altering event. As Merriam (2009) notes, theory is useful for practice. To conclude my dissertation study, I detail what I perceive are implications for intervention and practice from my study interpretations.

## Ethical Considerations

Although many participants learn and benefit positively from qualitative interviews just as the researcher does, some of my participants discussed and reflected

upon an experience that could be perceived as distressful, and which might have bring up unresolved or uncomfortable memories, feelings, or emotions. In that event, I was prepared to offer compassionate respect and solace, with referral to professional or spiritual counsel if I felt it might be helpful or necessary. This did not happen. In fact, in some cases, I possibly sensed reluctance in some participants to fully reveal thoughts and feelings with my probing inquiry. And that is ok.

Overall, I desired to and believe I did establish a safe, conversational, egalitarian relationship with my participants, and ensured them that I would maintain their anonymity throughout the process and in my reporting through the use of pseudonyms. Consequently, I took utmost care to preserve the privacy and wellbeing of the individuals who volunteered to participate in my study. Further, I provided full disclosure of my intent and outcomes of this research effort to the individuals I selected to interview, as specified in the verbal consent form shown in Appendix D. The participants were encouraged to ask questions at any time, and to review and correct my research interpretations and findings through the process of member checking, which some did. Lastly, I informed the participants up front that they were free to drop out of the study at any time. In fact, I did have two participants who asked to be dropped from the study after I had interviewed and begun analysis of their data. In the end, we were thankfully able to resolve the situation, and I was able to retain their rich data in this study.

## Limitations

It is well known that many empiricists discredit the interpretive, qualitative research approach. I concur with Denzin (2010), who holds that all facts are swayed by values and theory, and that there is never a single, authentic, objective "truth."

Qualitative research may not influence funding agencies but, on the other hand, it is highly transferable for practical applications to impact education, intervention, and practice. Further, qualitative research, in and of itself, teaches those involved in the process, as well as readers of the stories, the value and meaning of the authentic Self (Denzin, 2010).

In the first phase of my study, which was conducted as a pilot in the Fall of 2011 and Spring of 2012, wherein I gathered a small amount of demographic and quantitative data, I relied on self-report survey responses. Self-report measurement is assessed at one point in time and may or may not hold "true" at another. Furthermore, survey respondents may interpret a question differently, or even hold inaccurate conceptions. To partially address this sole threat to external validity, I used common language in clear, concise, and focused questions for my online survey. The fact remains, however, that surveys assess self-perceptions of a phenomenon, and reflect subjective, multiple realities. In fact, many of the participants volunteered for my study based on their belief that it was a "sudden, life-altering event," as well as a "sudden, life-altering, *learning* event," which was what I was specifically looking for as the topic of this research effort, and which I detailed as such in my selection criteria.

Internal threats to validity, manifested as either persuasion on the part of the researcher or response-bias by participants, was minimal I feel because the initial online data collection method was accessed in private by the respondents (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Moreover, I merely examined subjective experiences and their commonalities and differences with this inquiry, versus causation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). Lastly, the pilot study survey contained only two evaluative questions to assess subjective feelings

about a self-reported event. The data collected from the survey responses was discussed more extensively in the in-depth interviews with each participant, after which I triangulated the quantitative with the qualitative data.

Researchers of the positivist, scientific bent will perceive the small sample of 16 participants for the qualitative phase of this study as limiting, especially in light of my purpose to construct grounded theory. While I do not believe the qualitative researcher can necessarily generalize from a small sample to a greater population, I do believe that we can learn much from the study of individuals, and did see clear trends, patterns, and commonalities emerge, although the referenced events and individuals were widely diverse. Indeed, Cronbach, as cited by Alkin (2004), felt that "generalizations decay!" (p. 173). Moreover, this type of research involves subjective interpretation through the researcher's lens. As such, qualitative research is offered so that we may learn and grow by considering other perspectives and experiences, often those that stand out from the status quo. Lastly, I proposed and conducted an exploratory effort, intended to develop my research interest in this particular area, which may lead to a more extensive effort in the future. To conclude this chapter on my methodological design, I present more information on the pilot study I conducted.

## Pilot Study

The purpose of a pilot study is to assess the feasibility and methodology of a proposed research effort. The data gleaned from a pilot study may be irrelevant if issues with the methods arise. In my case, I felt that the pilot study I conducted in the Fall of 2011 and Spring of 2012 under IRB Protocol No. 11-460 (refer to Appendix B) reinforced my choice and practice of methodology, validated my research questions,

informed my theoretical perspectives and literature review, and brought forth a fair amount of quantitative research findings. The quantitative data I collected in my pilot study made me feel even stronger that this exploratory study holds some significance. Moreover, it provided me with a large sample pool from which to choose candidates who met the selection criteria to interview for the primary emphasis of the dissertation research plan I proposed. Because I did not see any needed modification of my methodology and research plan, I proposed to continue with this inquiry as designed, incorporating the pilot study findings into the dissertation phase.

I attribute what I view as the success of my pilot study to my extensive preliminary planning and design, and assessment of my research questions after speaking informally with a few individuals on this topic. Please see Appendix G, where I provide tables and graphs of the quantitative findings without any corresponding interpretation at this point. Table G.7 depicts the demographics for the five candidates I purposively selected to interview for the pilot study phase from the total pool of 60 survey volunteers who met the selection criteria.

I close this section by disclosing that, in a preliminary, informal exploration I conducted in the Fall of 2010 for a research class, I experimented with other methods of data collection. For instance, I gave a few individuals a disposable camera and asked them to take or send me a few photos of what "success in life" meant to them after the sudden, life-altering event they reported having experienced. I also asked them to track in a log I created the time they spent during each day for two weeks on work, play, friends, hobbies, community service, family, household chores, etc. The purpose of this log was to gain a sense of whether or not these individuals followed in their daily patterns

what they espoused as their priorities in life because of the event they experienced. Lastly, I observed where these individuals lived and how. While the data I collected from these methods validated what they shared with me in our informal discussions, I concluded that the time they had to expend on these research tasks I had asked them to do was not equivalent to the richness and depth of the data that emerges in a one-on-one, in-depth interview.

## Summary

In sum, the grounded theory research method entails collecting data through theoretical, continual sampling, and ongoing and constant interaction, comparison, and analysis of the data to create and refine an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2002, 2009; Glesne, 2010; Maxwell, 2005). The research strategy featuring my extended, holistic version of grounded theory method I proposed and conducted for my dissertation effort was designed to address threats to credibility and validity (Maxwell, 2005), including those inherent in the process of participant selection and researcher interpretation bias. I believe that my research design offered me the opportunity to gather, compare, and analyze data from multiple perspectives, and to contribute richly to a grounded theory and model. In this process, I inductively and reflexively created some preliminary assertions, theory, and a model that I hope will further understanding of the adult learning process that is inherent within the subjective experience of sudden, life-altering events. With this exploratory study, the word, “preliminary” is significant because, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintained, grounded theory is never complete, even when published.

Next, I present what I felt were the findings from this research effort, along with my discussion on these results.

# Chapter 4: Findings

"Whatever is rejected from the self, appears in the world as an event." ~ Carl G. Jung

No two individuals will have the same feelings about, reactions to, or learning from similar experiences, and what one may define as a sudden, life-altering event may differ from the next. This is the subjective phenomenon known to the qualitative researcher as seeing through the lenses of multiple realities, as data is collected and analyzed for findings.

In the following findings, I begin with the demographics of the 16 participants I interviewed in depth for the main, qualitative phase of my research effort to study the learning experience of adults who reported having had a sudden, life-altering event. Next, I give a definition of a sudden, life-altering event, based on the *emic* concepts (Maxwell, 2005) and *in vivo* codes (Creswell, 2007) that were voiced by my interviewees. This definition informs the grounded theory to come in Chapter 5. I then present the participants' stories as my findings, organized by my research questions, and grouped within each of those areas by the major themes and patterns that emerged about sudden, life-altering events. I conclude this chapter with a synopsis of what I perceive are the key findings from my research quest.

The findings I present here are my observations, assessments, and interpretations that I inducted (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) from my interviewees' narratives. My process of data analysis involved triangulating these results with one another, some of the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks I reviewed, and my pilot study descriptive statistics (please see Appendix G). In my data analyses and preliminary discussions, I strove to avoid abstracting from my participants' words, staying true to grounded theory

methodology by highlighting the emic themes and in vivo codes that emerged in common, which I cite using quotation marks. In seeking both patterns and deviations within my participants' stories, I was led down a learning path of my own to create theory for the process of learning from a sudden, life-altering event. In a sense, my interviewees and I co-created what flowered.

The organization of this chapter seemed to evolve naturally after repeated axial (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) views of the data I collected, in flow with my research questions. In my manner of analysis and organization, I aimed to highlight the related themes and patterns in the interviewees' passages, which was a continuously moving construction because many were intertwined. Nonetheless, I am confident that you, my reader, will also perceive the many congruent findings that emerged from this body of work in totality. As you read, I encourage you to formulate your own interpretations, which may very well differ from mine. We come from diverse walks of life, and align with different epistemologies and ontologies. Indeed, we too see unique realities. All interpretation is subjective and constructive, and should be viewed as creative. That, I hold, is the beauty of qualitative research, and of our life stories, themselves.

## Interviewee Demographics

Out of the 205 respondents who accessed my pilot study survey (given in Appendix C) and a valid sample of 186 individuals, 121 reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, or 65.1% (see Table G.1 in Appendix G). Nearly half of the 121 volunteered to be interviewed. When contacting those in the interview sample pool, I initially attempted to select participants at random. However, I had numerous issues in making contact, including leaving messages that were not returned, changed phone

numbers, volunteers who expressed that they were too busy at the time and would contact me later but never did, or respondents who had changed their mind about being interviewed. In the end, I was able to interview 16 of the 60 from the sample pool, which is more than the 12 to 15 interviews I successfully proposed. Originally, I felt that one and possibly two of the interviewees did not meet my selection criteria for having experienced a "sudden," life-changing event. After consideration, I decided that they did, simply because perception and meaning *are* subjective; if these individuals believed that they had experienced this type of event, then I was not going to discredit their perception. The demographic breakdown for the 16 interviewees is given in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1
*Demographics of Study Interviewees*

| Category | Class | Count |
|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | Caucasian | 12 |
| | "Halfie" (Hispanic/Caucasian) | 1 |
| | Hispanic | 2 |
| | Jewish | 1 |
| Age at time of event | 10-19 | 2 |
| | 20-29 | 5 |
| | 30-39 | 4 |
| | 40-49 | 4 |
| | 50-59 | 1 |
| Age at time of interview | 30-39 | 3 |
| | 40-49 | 2 |
| | 50-59 | 7 |
| | 60+ | 4 |
| Gender | Male | 8 |
| | Gay Male | 1 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Female | 7 |
| Education | 3 years college | 2 |
| | Bachelor's degree | 4 |
| | Post-graduate | 7 |
| | PhD/Dr | 3 |
| Raised | Midwest | 2 |
| | Eastern U.S. | 4 |
| | South | 1 |
| | Southwest | 7 |
| | West Coast | 1 |
| | Worldwide | 1 |
| Currently residing | Colorado | 2 |
| | Missouri | 1 |
| | New Mexico | 9 |
| | North Carolina | 1 |
| | Oregon | 1 |
| | Utah | 1 |
| | Brazil | 1 |
| Occupation | Retired registered dietician | 1 |
| | Retired tech customer service | 1 |
| | Retired pro-ball player, former deputy mayor/customer service, writer | 1 |
| | Retired minister | 1 |
| | Self-employed entrepreneur | 1 |
| | Academia and administration | 4 |
| | Animal naturopath/Council President | 1 |
| | Organic farmer and snowboard instructor | 1 |
| | Management | 4 |
| | Retail/church assistant | 1 |
| Marital Status | Married | 9 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Divorced | 2 |
| Single | 2 |
| Committed relationship | 2 |

In reviewing the demographics of the interviewees, they show that the majority were Caucasian, ranged in age at the time of their life-changing event from their teens to 50 something, and ranged in age at the time of the interview from their 30s to over age 60. All of the interviewees had some college education and many were highly educated. They were raised all over the U.S. and the world (although all were U.S. citizens), now reside all over the U.S. and the world, work(ed) in diverse careers, and most were married or in a committed relationship. No significance other than, perhaps, credibility, can be drawn from the demographics of such a small sample; the high education levels are most likely coincidental because of my own circle of influence and my data collection approach of snowball sampling. Before presenting further findings, I first review the purpose behind my research effort and my research questions.

## Research Purpose and Questions

I began my research with an interest that evolved over the course of my life experience, whereby I had observed some adults who, after experiencing a self-described life-altering event, spoke about paradigm shifts that seemingly occurred "overnight." These shifts were often expressed as involving a type of adult learning that connotes significant positive personal growth, even when a confrontation with adversity, trauma, or the fragility of life was a part of the experience. The opportunity I had to informally speak with some individuals who shared their stories with me, as well as a pilot study in which I gathered descriptive statistical data (see Appendix G) and formally interviewed

five adults, verified the occurrence of such a sudden, *pivotal* shift in perspectives with these particular individuals. Thus, the central purpose of this extended study was to explore naturalistically described experiences of this nature to better understand the adult learning process that follows such events. My methodological approach was a modified version I labeled as "holistic grounded theory," in that I conducted extensive interviewing of all the participants, beyond just what pertained to the emerging theory.

In this findings and discussion chapter, I respond to my research purpose by describing how these individuals learned through the process and paradigm shifts they reported, along with any consequential redefinitions or permanent changes in perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing their event. Specifically, the overarching research question (O-RQ) I proposed was:

- What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event?

To develop this primary research question, I proposed the following three subsidiary questions (S-RQs):

- What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event?
- Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why?
- What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event?

Because this *is* a grounded theory study and a process of discovery that evolved from seeing through the lenses of my participants' multiple realities, I first develop a definition of a sudden, life-altering event, based on their described perceptions.

## Defining a Sudden, Life-Altering Event

Because grounded theory methodology involves discovery, I left the construct of a "sudden, life-altering event" intentionally undefined in my proposed study. In my Participant Selection Survey (see Appendix C), I presented respondents with the following "yes" or "no" dichotomous statements, which served as my selection criteria: "I feel that I have experienced a sudden, life-changing event. Specifically, I changed my perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event." These statements were not intended to formally define a sudden, life-altering event but, rather, to generally describe the particular phenomenon I was seeking to study.

All of the interview participants affirmed that they had changed one or more of the aspects I listed in the survey. Of significance, most of the interviewees viewed their event itself as being "sudden," even "overnight," "abrupt," "dramatic," or "drastic." Several called it a "turnaround" experience, a "wake-up call," or a "defining moment" in their lives, which conveys the import of these types of experiences. Further questions I asked each participant gave more meaning to what they considered "sudden," and whether or not that also applied to the ensuing changes in their lives that they reported.

### Life was Turned Upside Down, Just by an Instant

Henry's sudden event brought immediate change: "It was a sudden separation between my life partner and myself, during my dissertation process, when she had an

affair. Everything in my life changed suddenly, overnight." He elaborated, "Ahm, it was like my life was just turned upside down. Just by an instant. So, I, it was like I lost everything within a matter of moments." Alice, who described reading a pivotal study on mental health in the Amish community[8], said: "I cannot tell you how critical, how important that was. And, like I said, it turned my world upside down. It was like [sigh], a whole new view of, of, . . . ahm, a whole new perspective about what was going on in our family." She later affirmed, "When there's such a huge shift like that, you just, it just turns you upside down." Becky similarly stated, "When I met [my future husband], it was basically just an abrupt transformation of my lifestyle and way of thinking, and what I had been exposed to." Glenn, who was showing off with a loaded gun, shared the following:

> A lot of Christians can't pinpoint any significant, ah, time in their life that they had a conversion experience, or *turnaround* experience. Ah, they just gradually developed into their Christian life, and they grew up in Christian families. But mine was more or less like St. Paul's [laugh] event, on the road to Damascus.[9] It was really, ah, a dramatic and sudden occasion. . . . I would say it is the defining event in my adulthood."

Likewise, John, upon receiving a diagnosis of AIDS, stated,

> This is the only one that I can say, there was this event, and this point in time, and I changed drastically from right before to right after. I've evolved my whole life,

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[8] Pardes, Herbert, Kaufmann, Charles A., Pincus, Harold A., West, Anne (1989). Genetics and psychiatry: Past discoveries, current dilemmas, and future directions. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 146(4), 435-443.

[9] The dramatic conversion event of Saul, a man who hated Gentiles, on the road to Damascus, as told in the New Testament of the Bible. The event led him to change his name to Paul and become an apostle of Jesus.

> but it's always little incremental steps, with other learning in my life experience that was not so *drastic*. . . . I look back at an old diary, and I think, "Huh, who is that person?" You know? But this is the only time that it was a life-changing event.

Joe, who was laid off from a professional position, emphatically stated, "It was something that shook everything that I was, ah, dependent, or what I *felt* I was dependent on, and it, you know, it destroyed my foundations, to an extent." It is interesting and telling that Joe felt his layoff was a "sudden, life-altering event" when he was aware that the probability of a layoff was high. He might have been referring to how he unexpectedly felt at the time of the actual event, as well as to the fact that significant contextual life changes were immediately imposed upon him: "Day of, I mean it was kind of just like getting slapped in the face, you know? It was, it was . . . kind of *rough*."

**Shocked, Numb, Stunned**

Reaction to a profound event may occur on many levels as a holistic response. All but two of the participants reported an interrelated physical, emotional, and cognitive condition of shock, numbness, or feeling stunned for a period of time immediately after their sudden, life-changing event, which varied from a few hours, to a few days or weeks, or to a year. McLaren (2010) describes shock or numbness as referring to a temporary transference of the psyche or an altered consciousness from pain of either a physical, spiritual, or cognitive nature, known as an inherent psychological defense mechanism of "disassociation" (p. 15). She discussed how this state may involve the feeling of being extremely overwhelmed, which may occur when an individual no longer perceives that they have control of their lives or boundaries. Indeed, several of the participants reported

that they were not able to "function" very well during this time. Janoff-Bulman (1992) theorized that shock and numbness occur because these types of events come about when an individual's basic life assumptions and, thus, their current self-identity, is "attacked" or "destroyed," which correlates with what my participants voiced. Jane described this state as:

> You go numb. And then you go stupid [laugh]. I left that doctor's office, 'cuz I had gone in all by myself because nobody said, "Oh by the way, I think you may have cancer." *Huge shock*! So I had to pull over, on the side of the road 'cuz I was driving, and I broke down, and I was shaking uncontrollably.

Likewise, Glenn told me, "It was, ah, I'd say, a dramatic . . . *dramatic* shock." He explained, "I was in a state of shock, that the bullets were in the gun. [silence] I got over the shock in a day or two, I guess." Karen said,

> I was pretty much in shock for a week or two, ahm, to be honest. And then, I, I wasn't able to function really well at work or, ah, . . . in the things that I normally do. The grieving still goes on, but that actual shock part where I just, I couldn't function very well went on, I'd say, a week or two.

Henry agreed, "Yeah, totally in shock. Totally in shock. You know, *everything* had just changed. And, so I, I, I couldn't study anymore." Kevin stated, "The initial shock was probably about a week." John described his state after his AIDS diagnosis as: "Immediate, as in shock, and shocking." Anthony described his shock after his brother unexpectedly died as lasting for a longer period of time than the other participants:

> The initial shock was a month but, just, that whole year was. Leading up to a one-year anniversary of his passing was probably the most basic level of, of healing and shock that I had to get through.

Alice, who reported a positive event, described dual reactions of being stunned and grateful for the profound relief:

> I recall what I was doing the day I read the article. I was initially stunned but, also, so very grateful for the report of the Amish research. I probably read the article a half dozen times, just trying to absorb it.

Likewise, Becky, who also reported a positive event, described her and her future husband's reactions with a dramatic metaphor:

> [My future husband] and I were kinda stunned for a while. It wasn't shock in a bad way; it was more like, you walked up to the top of a mountain, and ah, lightning was flashing all around you—that kind of experience.

Mark, who did not report this condition, did say, "Ah, you know, when I grew up, in the 60s and the 70s, if you were a male, you were not supposed to show your emotions. And, I think that was, you know, consistent with everybody who was connected with the crash." Interestingly, two of the three participants who reported what they felt to be a positive life-altering event experienced the condition of being "stunned." Two of the three participants, who experienced the sudden death of a loved one, reported residual shock or numbness that lasted longer than the initial shock period, abating slowly. One of these two felt that this condition lasted for about a year. They both articulated that they did not know if that residual feeling ever completely goes away, and another alluded

to a similar perspective. Christy labeled this feeling as an "ache," which comes to her when her thoughts return to the past.

What seemed to mark the close of this shocked, numb, or stunned condition for my participants was a subsequent period of reflection, before substantive changes in perspectives, priorities, or behaviors were made, other than actions that seemed to be immediately and contextually necessary, and that these individuals instinctually carried out.

**More than One Sudden, Life-Altering Event**

Of interest, several of the participants mentioned that they had had more than one of "these types of events" in their lifetime. For example, Kathy, who reported a positive event, said, "You know, I could think of other things, like when my mom died, or . . . when my sister came out as gay." Likewise, Mark, who was supposed to be on a plane that killed his friends on a varsity team, reflected, "I'd have to say, ah, that my mother's death, when I was about 14, was probably at the top of the list. But this is very close to it." Alice stated that she has experienced a total of five sudden, life-altering events: "The second big one was when I was laid off. Getting laid off, joining NAMI[10], I told you about my divorce, ahm, Toastmaster's and, then, I think the last event was in one of my courses." Likewise, Jane stated that these types of events in her life were: "*Numerous*. Before the age of 12. Parent died. Ah, grandparents dying. Great-grandparents dying. Aunts, uncles dying. Everybody dying." Karen too has had other life events she

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[10] The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is "the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness." (http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=About_NAMI, accessed September 11, 2014).

perceived as being significant: "My daughter about, ummm, 18 months ago, moved away, and that was another, ahm, … and it was after my mom passed away." Karen also referenced her daughter being diagnosed with cancer. Kevin was going through several profound events while he was unemployed: "At the same time, ah, our oldest son was, ah, in the throes of, ahm, drug addiction and rebellion. And my wife's father was dying of Alzheimer's."

These participants did not share with me why they did not choose to describe the other events they brought up. Possibly, the other events, although significant, were not so sudden, or they may not have altered their lives as profoundly as the event they highlighted for my study. It is important to note that, in my pilot study (Appendix G), where I gathered descriptive statistics from survey respondents and formed a sample pool of potential interviewees for this qualitative effort, I did not specify that I was seeking a single event that a respondent perceived to be the *most* significant sudden, life-altering event of their lifetime. When my interviewees reported events I did not expect, such as a job loss that two knew might happen, and when several respondents mentioned experiencing more than one of "these types of events," I realized I had made an assumption that some individuals have had one *single* sudden, life-altering event.

Several conclusions might be drawn at this point. First, individuals may be reluctant to speak about an event that was very traumatic for them, and some research has discussed this phenomenon (W. R. Miller, 2004; William R. Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). Indeed, life events silence some of us. Too, I have already mentioned that we all differ in how we perceive the experiences of our lives. What one person may feel is "sudden," "overnight," or "life-changing" may not be so to another. Moreover, time is a relative

construct and, perhaps, meaningless during these types of events, similar to how the concept of time is completely absent during the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Or, possibly, some individuals' lives are characterized by more "disruptive" events than others. Lastly, this could indicate a capacity in some individuals to perceive multiple significant and life-altering events. Nonetheless, these are suppositions, and not substantiated by anything that emerged from the data I collected. I wish to point out that some of the other life-altering events that Alice mentioned were related to an initial event of witnessing her mother's mental illness as a child.

I did ask one participant who brought up another profound event, if he thought the first one helped prepare him for the second, to which he responded in the affirmative. Here is what I view as a potentially important discovery for future exploratory study, wherein one significant event may build character strengths and/or wisdom that serve to better prepare and guide a person through future profound events. This discovery is similar to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001), which purports that positive emotions increase attention and cognition, and which, in turn, build personal resources—ranging from the physical and intellectual, to the social and psychological. According to this positive psychologist, the phenomenon initiates "upward spirals" that increase emotional wellbeing.

**Definition of a Sudden, Life-Altering Event**

Grounded in the words voiced by the participants I interviewed, an emic definition of a sudden, life-altering event emerged: Either a negative or positive event, but more often negative, which occurs suddenly, "in an instant," "abruptly," "overnight," "right then and there," or "within a matter of moments," and which is an event that the

individual perceives as being "defining," "dramatic," or "drastic," and that "shook" or "changed" "everything" they felt they were "dependent on," or "turned their world upside down." It represents a, if not *the* primary event in their lifetime, in which "foundations" change or are "destroyed" in "significant" ways afterward, as in an "abrupt transformation" or "huge shift." This event shortly thereafter incurs a period of being "stunned" or, more often, a state of "shock" and/or "numbness," which may range from lasting a few minutes to an entire year, although most commonly for a couple of days to a week. An individual may feel they have experienced two or more of these types of events, which may be related to one another, or one sudden, life-altering event may possibly assist in "preparing" the individual for a later "significant" event, even when one event was not perceived as sudden or life changing.

Examples of positive events from this study were: met future spouse, and read groundbreaking research following a parent's mental illness. Examples of negative events were: separation after partner had an affair, death of a loved one, job loss, adopting a very ill dog, breast cancer diagnosis, AIDS diagnosis, and showing off with a loaded gun. See Appendix J for the stories of the participants that describe their events in detail. Two dramatic metaphors the participants voiced colorfully illustrate the significance and the subjective quality of these events to us: "lightening flashes all around, upon climbing to the top of a mountain," and the religious conversion of Paul, the Apostle, on the road to Damascus.

This inductive, co-created definition of a sudden, life-altering event, grounded on emic concepts and in vivo codes from the participants themselves, forms the contextual basis for my study, validates its significance to these individuals and, in my view, its

importance to study, and informs my theory to come. Next, I address my first subsidiary research question.

## S-RQ 1: What Were the Events Experienced and How Do They Relate with Mezirow's Definition of a Transformative Learning Event?

Now that a definition of a sudden, life-altering event has emerged from the data, I can correlate this new understanding with the definition of a transformative learning event, to respond to my first subsidiary research question. According to Mezirow (2009), transformative learning is a process of learning in adults who can make abstractions, and involves the ability to question and re-evaluate perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, values, and/or attitudes, which inform behavior (Cranton, 2006). As a theory of adult learning, or andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformative learning empowers significant change. In the following response, I first present the specific events that my participants reported.

### S-RQ 1, Part 1: Participants' Reported Events

Table 4.2 is a synopsis of the types of sudden, life-altering events my interviewees reported, categorized by whether or not they considered them to be, essentially, a "positive" or "negative" event at the time of occurrence.

Table 4.2
*Synopsis of Interviewees' Sudden, Life-Altering Events*

| Participant | Sudden, Life-Altering Event | Positive Event | Negative Event |
|---|---|---|---|
| Christy | Spouse left, drug addiction | | X |
| Henry | Life partner had affair, separation | | X |
| Becky | Met future husband | X | |
| Kathy | Met future husband | X | |
| Karen | Death of parent | | X |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Anthony | Death of brother | | X |
| Mark | Death of friends | | X |
| Susan | Job loss | | X |
| Maria | Job loss | | X |
| Joe | Job loss | | X |
| Kevin | Job loss | | X |
| Alice | Groundbreaking research on mental illness (Following Mother's mental illness) | X | |
| Claire | Adopting a very ill dog | | X |
| Jane | Breast cancer diagnosis | | X |
| John | AIDS diagnosis | | X |
| Glenn | Showing off with a loaded gun | | X |

Of note in Table 4.2, three of the 16 interviewees reported experiencing a positive event at the time of occurrence, which is 18.75% of the total interview sample. Most of the events, including those reported as positive, are in common with events shown in the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), which associates significant life events with stress and subsequent illness. Although Table 4.2 depicts variety in the types of events my participants reported, I had hoped for more diversity. Even with some shared experiences, all of the participants' perspectives are unique, as we shall discover in the findings to come.

**S-RQ 1, Part 2: Relating to Mezirow's Definition of a Transformative Learning Event**

Mezirow (2009) prioritized transformative learning in the context of formal, higher education, defining it as the most significant type of learning in adulthood, and identified ten distinct, successive stages:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critically assessing assumptions
4. Recognizing a connection between discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploring options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plan
8. Trying new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence with the new roles and relationships
10. Reintegrating into life with a new perspective

Mezirow (2009) saw this type of learning as an incremental, reconstructive, dialogic, and rational process, which transforms frames of reference and perspectives to encompass individuation as an outcome, and which I relate to Jung's concept of the Self in forming an identity, as cited by Campbell (1971). To respond to the second part of my first subsidiary research question, I examined each of the ten stages in Mezirow's transformative learning paradigm, in relation to my interviewees' sudden, life-altering events.

**Stage 1. A disorienting dilemma,** which is the "event" that begins the process of transformative learning for Mezirow**.** As depicted in the definition of a sudden, life-altering event that emerged from my findings, all of the participants clearly experienced what they perceived to be a "disorientating" event. While their individual perspectives are subjective in nature, their language is evidence that these events were profound and life changing for each one of them. However, I personally think of a "dilemma" as

signifying a problem. When I asked my participants if they viewed their event, or situation succeeding the event, as a problem for which they needed to find solutions, surprisingly few of them responded affirmatively. Those few who did so mentioned issues they had to resolve almost as an afterthought, after I intensely probed for that data. For example, Kathy said,

> There was a period of time, and probably not too unusual, after we were married, maybe after about 6 months, when I kind of wondered, "Why did I marry this person?" Ahm, 'cuz you have to get used to people. You know, little things, just daily living things. And I thought, "Well, *this* is really dumb. Because he's got such great attributes. Why should these little things that naggle, bother you?" And, that subsided pretty quickly.

In discussing the very ill dog she adopted, Claire explained,

> What I needed to learn is, and this is sad to say, in this society, there is a game you have to play, and work with those that are *not* going to force that kind of stuff on you. Unfortunately, in most cases, those emergency ones, they are stuck in that paradigm, and they are not gonna hear you. I've heard everything—that the seizures were caused from my lack of *not* vaccinating. Or, you know, I *allowed* him to get some kind of a distemper strain or something, and I'm like, "Oh my goodness, this is just insane." So, you know, what I'm having to learn through all of this, is there's a *way* to speak and a *way* to work through these things.

Karen was one of the few who did view her event as a problem: "I think, yes, from an aspect that there was so much grief. I saw the grief as a problem, and I wasn't

sure how to find solutions for it." Kevin also viewed his situation as a problem, but also expressed it in terms of solutions for "incremental improvement":

> My number one need for a solution was to get a job. And, that's a problem that needs a solution. I *had* to accept the solution; there was not an obvious *perfect* solution. So, my *first* step was to interview for a job that I didn't even know what it was. And, my second step was to *learn* to do that job, *on* the job. I did not have training. Essentially, the business model of the guy who had the company that I was working for, his business model was, he took people that he thought were smart and capable, and threw them in the deep end. And, there was very little mentoring. With coaching, oddly enough, and the company that's all about providing mentors and coaches, and so, I think, you know, to get back to the short answer, the biggest lesson I learned was that, you *have* to move forward. And moving forward, you *can't* always assemble a perfect solution; you *have* to accept a *better* solution in the first instance and, then, you can look for a better solution again. And so, this idea of incremental improvement, ahm, was a very important learning lesson from this event.

Note here the theme about the need to accept and move forward, rather than dwelling on the situation as a dilemma or problem, which is one we will see often again.

***Constraints and barriers.*** To probe for more information from the participants, most of whom stated that they did not perceive their experience as a problem, I asked about constraints and barriers, of which many were then mentioned. Perhaps these constraints and barriers were not initially expressed as problems because the focus was on "moving forward," as Christy says here, repeating what Kevin articulated:

Probably the biggest barrier and constraint, after having used marijuana for almost 30 *years*, was not using marijuana anymore. That was, that was the *hugest*, I mean, that was just *gigantic*. I can't even, ahm, because it was, I mean, it was like I explained before, it was a *third* person in my relationship with my husband. And it was a *fifth* person in terms of my relationship with my *parents*. And it was a *sixth* person between my best friend and, and my husband, and my parents. So, getting rid of it, it's like *losing* a, ah, a *friend*. It's like losing a *partner*. And, anybody who's been through a breakup, or anybody who's had a relationship with somebody that they held very *dear*, that there was actual *love* there, just having that *stop* . . . is . . . the most difficult thing I've, I've ever *done*. . . . Probably the second barrier was *finally* understanding that, you know, . . . ah, I have to begin to make decisions *with* my husband, *autonomous* from my relationship with my mother and father. That I can't *always* live up to their expectations. . . . Another constraint is really just the day-to-day living that is taking place. It was very *hard* to change our professional directions! Ahm, and we've enjoyed that and, yet, at the same time, it's caused difficulties. Financial difficulties, ahm, strain on the relationship because of how hard it is starting new jobs. Ahm, the . . . well, you know, the sometimes negative impressions that people have, especially about older people like us trying something new, ahm, fresh starts in different careers. And yet, there's admiration, too. It's another barrier and constraint, in terms of, "Can our relationship hold together, making this kind of *phenomenal* change?" And we decided, "You know what? Come what may, this is what we're gonna do. We've been down the road; we know where our issues were; we know where

our problems were; we know where we went wrong, and we're *not* going back. We're gonna move forward."

Glenn most emphatically said he did not view his changed situation as a problem, even though there were constraints and barriers he faced:

It was very difficult for me to, ah, especially, to go away to college and seminary. I made the decision, because of my event, to be a better Christian and, then, as a part of being a better Christian, I made the decision to go into full-time Christian service, and I felt I had to go to seminary, and that was very difficult because the seminary was 1300 miles from where I lived. And, I also changed the college I wanted to go to.

Jane faced multiple health "nightmares" after her event:

I can't even talk to you about that. I had, you know, physical . . . consequences. Oh God. I walked around for a year like this [she held an arm out to her side], because I had 17 inches of surgical incisions. . . . Going through this whole thing, I've had thyroid issues. It was, it was a *nightmare*. It was one year of pure, unadulterated *hell*. That, and, and, what I realized was, ahm, I started getting really paranoid. It was pretty tough. . . . We got that under control; it was a long, ugly thing, so. It took a year to get that under control. Meanwhile, I'm going through radiation, and that's a whole other thing. . . . And then, September 11 happened. Oh my God. I mean, what a *nightmare*. I was on Tamoxafin, and having horrible, horrible, horrible night sweats. I wasn't having, ahm, I wasn't having, ahm, ahm, hot flashes so much, only when I was emotional. It didn't matter if it was a good emotion or a bad emotion. Just *any* type of emotion. I

> would just, you know, start sweating. . . . Oh my God, I can't even tell you. It was horrible.

Later, Jane discussed financial constraints, as well as insurance issues:

> Long story, ahm, I had to go on short-term disability, and didn't get paid for six weeks, so, and that, yeah, oh, it was, it was awful. . . . And, my favorite was the, ah, I had to have two surgeries to get all the cancer out. The second one, the anesthesiologist was not a part of my [insurance] group.

***Situation as solution or opportunity.*** Interestingly, most of the interviewees saw their situation as a solution or an opportunity, rather than a dilemma, as Becky clearly stated:

> I thought of it as a solution to a problem [laugh]. I think, for me, when I was first, you know, exposed to [my future husband's] lifestyle and his folks, it was really foreign to me. And, it was difficult for me to grasp, I think for years, as I've been observing their, ah, how they did things, and how they, you know, their house, and small things that they did. And, for a while, it was like being a stranger in a strange land. And so, sometimes, I couldn't grasp it; I couldn't understand it. So, it did take a lot of time and reflection to figure out, you know, how, *why* these people were behaving the way they were.

Similar to Becky, Maria said: "I think the result created opportunity." She described a process of re-conceptualizing her constraints: "I had to rethink it, like this. I became a student because I went and signed up. . . . I dove in and, ahm, never got guidance to stop or take a break [laugh]. So, I had to learn how to study again; I had to learn how to learn." John, too, didn't see his situation as a problem, and shared an astute

perspective: "I wouldn't say it *created* problems; it just changed the situations I had to deal with on a daily basis," including:

> Health, for one. Just regaining my health, keeping my health. Ah, finances. When you give up high-stress jobs, you give up good pay. Ah, I had to adjust my view of home. I've always, for the most part, lived alone and liked it. Ahm, been able to support myself. I financially can't right now, given the type of work that I'm doing, so I've had to let people help me. That's been a challenge.

Anthony saw his situation as an inherent "duty," versus a problem:

> I don't think I thought that way. I saw it more as a duty to . . . to, to step up to the plate, and to be that man for the family. Ahm, I didn't feel the need to have to . . . to *understand* what was going on. I just felt natural at having to do what I had to.

***Summary of Stage 1.*** Unlike Mezirow's label for this first stage of the transformative learning process, most of the participants did not seem to perceive their sudden, life-altering event as a "dilemma," although it certainly was a disorienting event, which brought multiple constraints and barriers to surmount. Note that the interviewees who did not view their situation as a problem experienced an event they viewed as negative. Thus, there were few internal barriers with their thoughts, emotions, or behaviors to resolve. Rather, there were predominantly what they seemed to view as given or almost inconsequential external barriers.

Several of the responses clearly indicated a more optimistic *acceptance* of their changed situation with a seemingly inherent motivation to move forward, and one saw his changed circumstances as a "duty" that felt natural to assume. I view the participants' acceptance of their external changed reality, along with the expressed need or desire to

continue moving forward, versus that of having to resolve a dilemma, as a key aspect to making successful change after a sudden, life-altering event. In light of this evidence, we can see a difference here with Mezirow's definition of a transformative event. In short, the learning process from a sudden, life-altering event appears to commence with the perspective of a disorienting experience, rather than a dilemma or problem, along with subsequent acceptance of a changed reality and a felt need to continue moving forward that succeeds the immediate shock, numb, or stunned state.

**Stages 2 and 3. Self-examination and critically assessing assumptions.** I hold that critically assessing assumptions is a part of self-examination through the process of reflection, so I address both of these stages together. Examining the Self, or reflecting, is commonly thought of as internal cognitive dialogue, although it can also be a process of prayer, meditation, or even writing and journaling. Whereas prayer is considered a conversation with a higher power, and meditation as a method of quieting chaotic thoughts, writing or journaling is a tangible way to express feelings, thoughts, and perspectives. All of these approaches are important practices of awareness, wherein one can recognize and respond to internal states of mind and emotions with compassion, intention, and choice, rather than attempting to function in daily life with automatic behavior and avoidance or, worse, obsessively ruminating on the past in a "stuck" pattern. The willingness to internally confront the new reality of sudden, changed circumstances, be they positive or negative, use that process to find meaning and seek a path of equilibrium from the chaos and subsequent self-vulnerability, and arrive at wise decisions for future action is at the heart of transformative learning. It is, in fact, this practice that truly begins that learning process.

***Both critical and self-reflection but critical first***. To learn more about the specific content of the reflection that all my participants stated they practiced after their sudden, life-changing event, I queried them about whether or not their process was self-reflection, critical assessment, both, or something else. For those who expressed practicing both types of reflection, I probed to discover which they did more of. I was asked to explain the difference between self- and critical reflection by many of the interviewees. In doing so, I explained that I viewed self-reflection as a nonjudgmental examination of assumptions, beliefs, behaviors, and experiences, whereas I felt that critical reflection was more of a negative judgment or critique of the Self, often with a pro and con weighing of two stances. Christy gives us insight into the critically reflective questions that ran through her mind after her husband walked out the front door:

> I . . . don't really think you can have one without the other, so, ahm, it was *both*. Ahm, I think it had to start with something that comes pretty naturally, at least for *me*, which was to first try to determine, ah, worst-case scenarios, best-case scenarios: "Where will this lead? What caused it? Who can we blame?" You know? Ahm, "Is there somebody that I can blame? Is there a specific thing that I can put my finger on? Is it because I was raised the way I was raised? Is it because, ahm, my husband doesn't love me anymore?" So, I went through a lot of different, ahm, ways of looking at the situation. And I think that that came first, before I even began to *really* look at, ahm, who *I* was. And who I had *become*. And whether or not that was really the *type* of woman I wanted to continue to be. And, it ends up, it was *not* what I wanted to continue to be. I didn't *want* to live a double life. I didn't *want* to live a triple life. I didn't want to

> *lie* to *anybody*. . . . Ahm, so, there was Self, and then there was self-reflection, and then there was reflection of the entire, ahm, the *beast*, you know? The whole of it, you know? "How did it affect *me*?" And, "How did it affect other people?" Ahm, I think I was, ah, *more* concerned with how it would *look* to other people. Probably first, once I got over that initial shock, I started to *worry* about, "Ok, what is my family going to think? What are my friends going to think? What are my business associates going to think? What am I doing?" And then, "What am I going to do?" And, "What decisions do I need to make?"

It is important to note that Christy expressed conducting a critical and concerned examination of her Self and what others in her life would think of her first, prior to a deeper, more honest and compassionate self-reflection. Henry alternated between critical and self-reflection. I remarked that he seemed to have worked hard to make *self-reflection* surmount, to which he responded:

> I would say *so*, yeah. So, this critical reflection would just kind of reiterate, back and forth, "Ok, who am I, what are you doing, where are you going?" But I kept this common theme, and I think my friends *helped* me do that: "Stay on a path," even though it was retarded; it was slowed down, . . . delayed.

In both Henry's and Christy's responses, we can see how they prioritized taking the time to spend on reflection before making significant decisions about their future. We can also see that Henry's friends had a positive influence in his reflective practice, in helping him to realize that he needed to keep moving forward. Henry also expressed that he did a lot of self-talk and self-coaching. Similarly, Claire said that her event "made me get in touch with things that I had buried." She practiced both critical and self-reflection,

and noted that the self-reflection came later on, as did Christy. Claire revealed that reflection was now an ongoing practice for her, as it is for many of the participants. She also mentioned the use of prayer, as did Glenn and Kevin. Claire's flowing river metaphor is depictive of the common forward movement theme we are seeing. Specifically, Claire stated:

> The self-reflection's been more, ahm, in more recent years, and more in, I'd say, the last three years or so. Before that, it was all outward-, ahm, focusing: "How can I learn more, to do more, to help more, to reach out more?" And now, the reason why it's been more introspective is because I realized that the only thing that hinders the more going out is less, ahm, *fixing in*. And I think of it as, like, my Self as a conduit: "How can love pour in? If love is pouring into me, why isn't it flowing out?" And, so, and I feel that, you know, love is pouring into me from God, you know? I don't want to be a *dam*; I want to be a river [laugh]. So, *movement* and *flowing*. . . . And it's not going to go out if I'm not looking at what's hindering *me*, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, whatever. So. It's been, because of my event, you know, I'm one of those people, "I've gotta save the world." You know, I'm *not* saving the world. But I can make a *difference*.

Becky said she practiced more self-reflection:

> I wasn't weighing the pros and cons, and I wasn't trying to make a decision between, I mean, I'd already, I knew where my heart was. But I really had to do some self-reflection to understand, first of all, what *I* was; I was kind of unformed, so I didn't really have much awareness of myself, or who I was. It was

like, coming in contact with something very different brought me an awareness of what I was, at that point, and where I wanted to go.

Becky did, however, describe some critical reflection: "I think sometimes, I did feel inadequate because I didn't know of *so* many things. Sometimes I felt ignorant. Ah, and felt bad that I had come from such a limited background." Likewise, Karen responded, "Self-reflection. Ahm, seeing a need and just stepping up, and doing it. Ahm, I don't do, yeah, I would say almost all of it was self-reflection." Maria said self-awareness was her "greatest teacher" in this event, and offered further insight into strengthening her Self through her more critical reflective practice, which sometimes involves journaling:

> For me, I tend to, the negatives shine a lot more, so, you know? I see those, but I'm trying to balance developing more of an appreciative inquiry model, and to integrate that a little bit more. And so, I've been working on that lately. So, yeah, it's critical, both negative and positive. I use the critical in order to gain understanding. Because I believe that, ahm, even negative circumstances hold knowledge within them and, if I can learn from that, then it's good. But it's a matter of identifying what it is that I want to learn, that's subjectively desirable. . . . I learned, ahm, it was, more than anything, it was to identify what was important to me, you know? Not to let that be dictated by society or by what I thought other people would want, or think that I should do to *fit*. It was coming from that. Defining my own path, and, ahm, that's probably the most important. That, and taking that ownership, and having it for the first time, really.

Much like Maria, who referred to prioritizing self-needs, Anthony referred to both types of reflection as a holistic practice:

> I would say that . . . the critical piece, I saw that, ahm, a lot of things that . . . I thought were important, in terms of the, the culture and the lifestyle, and the entertainment that I get from television and the internet, and things like that, kind of showed me where I was making mistakes, assuming that certain things were important to me, and they really weren't. Ahm, and I realized that, like I said, that time changed my own perspective on things, and helped me to, ah, recognize, ah, events or forces that really were something that didn't matter and, even though I would see other folks really getting into it, and think that there were such major and awesome and cool things to be a part of, I just recognized that it really was insignificant in the grand scheme of things. And the self-reflection piece too, just being able to recognize that I, ah, *have* strength, and I *have* weaknesses, and I have a lot of people that really *depend* on me to be that stable force in our family and in our community; it really has helped me, get me through this event. . . . So I would say it was about even. Because I have always been somebody that has been pretty confident in myself, and I did have to adjust a few things. . . . I really saw it as a holistic experience, and recognize that there are so many things and so many variables in our world, within me and that part of me, that I had to consider it *all* with my actions.

Kevin, too, practiced both types of reflection:

> I don't know which one was more. I think that, maybe even, equal amounts because, ahm, something that I think I have or maybe developed more during that

> time is, I'm pretty good at assessing both my strengths and weaknesses, and, ahm, so, I think there was some of that, as well as some more generic introspection.

Kevin also prayed: "Prayer is, is partly self-reflection because, if you're quiet before God, you create an opportunity for God to open your eyes and mind to some new ideas and new ways of thinking." Maria, Mark, and Alice mentioned writing and journaling. Mark stated, "I'd have to say more self-reflection than anything else." In writing about the event, he felt that "means I've . . . released it. . . . The writing of the stories was probably, ah, more of a . . . coping mechanism." Likewise, Alice said, "It was self-reflection. Thinking, thinking, thinking. Right. . . . I think I just . . . thought. Maybe I did a little writing. Yes, I did." Jane practiced both critical and self-reflection, and labeled her process as meditation:

> Just to be able to quiet my mind, it was very important. . . . So, I did do some meditation, really just self-thought, you know? "What am I doing? Is this important?" It was both, and it truly was about 50/50.

Initially, however, the process began for Jane with other cognitive activities that were more ruminative in nature, in the transition from shock to reflection after her cancer diagnosis:

> What I kept hearing, ahm, multiple times a day, for a couple years, was … my prognosis, you know, what the doctor told me. And I would have to tell myself, "I can't do that anymore. I can't think that." So, a couple times a day, I would start, I would hear that, and I would just have to turn it off. And then, ahm, but I'd still hear it. And . . . I would, I . . . I would intentionally start thinking about

> something happy, and then I'd be like, "Ok, I can make it through." And then I just heard it less and less and less.

Glenn stated that his process was: "more self-reflection than it was critical reflecting." Likewise, John expressed that he practiced "more self-reflection. It was now about me: 'What did I need to do to adapt to my new world and world view?'" Kathy too, felt she did more self-reflection: "I've done both. I try to do the more positive one."

***Summary of Stages 2 and 3.*** In sum, most of the participants did express practicing self-examination through the internal cognitive practice of reflection, which was typically, although not always, more self-reflective than critical in nature. Several of the participants stated that they did more critical reflection first, before moving on to a more compassionate self-examination, while a few intentionally used critical reflection as a tool for self-assessment and improvement.

We can now see from the interviewees' narratives that there were two distinct aspects to acceptance: (a) the acceptance of their changed situation, as described in Stage 1, and (b) the acceptance of the Self, which I view as the key that moved these individual from critical reflection, on to a more compassionate self-examination and the beginning of growth. The moving forward metaphor that has emerged in several of the participants' narratives depicts this growth process, and is a strong theme throughout all of my findings. Jane articulated this necessary dual acceptance of both her Self and her event:

> I was just such a lost person. I cannot tell you how lost I was. I was looking for an, actually, I know what I was looking for. I was looking for acceptance. . . . And, before the event, what I realized, well, I *didn't* realize, was that I had to

accept *myself* first. So there you go. And so, now, I *accept* myself. I ain't perfect but, boy, I'll tell ya, I think it's pretty fair.

Moreover, the interviewees' narratives reveal that there was more to their practice than critical and self-reflection. Indeed, this was a period of individuation. For some, examining the Self came first. For others, examining the external reality came first. And for still others, it was intertwined. More specifically, I perceived from my participants' descriptions of their reflective content that they were assimilating the event and the external changes it brought, exploring their feelings, evaluating supposed feelings of others in their immediate circles, and pondering how they might "fit" in with their new reality, along with assessing their assumptions within these feelings, as well as appraising their Self. However, this last piece was not necessarily in a critical form. As such, it was clearly an important time of both learning about the Self and modifying their self-identity. Further, this reflective period seemed to serve as a period of inactivity, other than what was necessary to attend to daily life—a time to pause and contemplate deeply about what decisions needed to be made before taking substantive action.

Reflection for my participants was not solely a cognitive practice. Two of the participants mentioned writing some of their thoughts and feelings down. Indeed, writing was central to Mark's practice of examination and what he labeled as "coping." Three of the participants used prayer as an approach for guidance. One mentioned meditation to quiet her mind from ruminating. Perhaps most important, the reflective practice was not a stage that necessarily and successively completed before leading to the next stage but, rather, it remains as ongoing practice. For instance, John shared that, each night before allowing himself to fall asleep, he forces himself to think of five unique, positive things

that happened that day: "I do this when I'm falling asleep because, tomorrow, I need to find five more things."

**Stage 4. Recognizing a connection between discontent and the process of transformation.** Here again, I view this stage as being a part of reflective content. As such, I would say this connection did occur for some of my participants, either as a sudden realization at the time of the event, or during the process of critical reflection. I discuss the sudden realization phenomenon in more detail later. In demonstrating this connection, some participants spoke of their event as a "wake-up call," including John, who expressed feeling that he "deserved" the AIDS diagnosis because of his lifestyle. John also mentioned that, prior to his event, he "went through a long period of time where I existed. And now, I'm living and trying to make the most I can out of the moments I have." Likewise, Jane alluded to discontent with her "fast-lane" lifestyle leading up to her diagnosis of cancer, and that she was not surprised about it, upon reflection. Rather than expressing regret, shame, or guilt, however, Jane articulated that she had been a "lost," "shallow person." This indicates that she has clearly accepted her Self, going through the Stage 2 and 3 process. Kathy voiced that she had felt "lonely" prior to her event, and "could have settled for *ok*," but did not. Nor did she have any expectations that this "discontent" would be resolved. Similarly, Becky mentioned that she had decided to not return to college, and was searching for something else more satisfying, although she did not know what that something else might be, and merely had an open mind to finding it.

Glenn clearly recognized this connection: "To me, it meant that, ah, God had used his grace to give me salvation, and I wanted to express my thanks to him by serving

him." I believe that Christy recognized this connection, in that she immediately quit using marijuana upon her sudden event, in a sudden act of "knowing" that "clarity" was needed to provide what she said was crucial to thinking about her changed circumstances. She also expressed how she felt she had been "lying" to others, in hiding this addiction. I feel that Joe too recognized this connection, but spoke of it in more positive terms as a "release" for him to pursue his dreams:

> I think, that year before I got laid off, I was really going through a lot of changes that I needed to go through? But I was just in a job that was kind of keeping me anchored, and keeping me from pursuing those visions I had. And now that that's been released, I mean, the visions are there, and now it's just, you know, trying to figure out that path to get to those dreams.

I see this as a key point, that Joe's layoff event "released" him to discover a new journey, serving as a means of both freedom and impetus. In fact, all of those who were laid off expressed discontent with their prior career paths and quality of life, and what they perceived as success before their life-altering event, following the direction that society, culture, or family had pointed then in, "wearing a suit and driving a BMW," as John articulated, or "*groomed* to fit some white collar job," as Joe voiced.

***Summary of Stage 4.*** In short, a connection between discontent and the process of transformation was not necessarily expressed as being clearly recognized by most of the participants. However, many of the interviewees alluded to "allowing" factors in society, others in their immediate circles, or their lifestyles to have power and control over their perspectives, assumptions, and values. I align with Mezirow, in that this recognition, whether or not conscious, is indicative of the participants individuating and

claiming ownership or responsibility for making authentic change in their lives. As another aspect of their reflective process, it represents some of the content, rather than a distinct stage in their learning and change process.

Otherwise, we would most likely need to perceive a potentially "karmic" or prophetic connection between these life-altering events that occurred suddenly, seemingly out-of-the-blue, as reconciliation acts of inner conflict with external behavior and lifestyle. That is a conception that I will leave for you, my reader, to ponder. I might refer to the quote I used to open this chapter by Carl Jung: "Whatever is rejected from the self, appears in the world as an event."

**Stage 5. Exploring options for new roles, relationships, and action.** Some of the narratives presented under the previous stages of reflection revealed an exploration of options for new beginnings, including new roles, relationships, perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors. It is in this Stage 5 where a new or "redefined" Self begins to solidify for these individuals. In essence, this stage indicates an ontological change, where new ways of "being" are assumed.

***Redefining Self.*** Christy said she "absolutely" changed her self-identity, clarifying:

> I have *redefined*. Ahm, I have a feeling, actually, I *know*, my mother and father would have been *very* happy with, ahm, my husband and I continuing to work at our jobs, living like we did and being even more close to a comfortable *retirement* at this stage in our lives. But, we both made a decision to change our career paths.

Henry realized an impact on his self-identity "to some degree, which he viewed as a positive benefit:

> I don't know if the core of who I am changed that much. . . . Through that experience, I didn't know who I was; I was *lost*. I really had to recreate myself, and it was also an exciting opportunity *to* do that; to recreate your Self. So that's another kind of ah, blessing that came from that, a benefit.

Alice expressed that she felt more truly "authentic" after her event, referring to no longer feeling a foreign sensation of "face-cracking" that she had carried with her through many years of her life: "It was definitely self-worth. It was, it was . . . being recognized that, ahm, that I had a brain and I was ok. That [sigh] recognition, ahm, . . . being validated. . . . And that face-cracking sensation has totally gone." Maria voiced that all the changes she made in her life after her event "changed the way I had to self-identify, going from full-time working to being a student, and a returning student, an adult student."

***Summary of Stage 5.*** When my participants' sudden, life-changing event occurred, and the initial state of shock, numbness, or feeling stunned abated, it almost seemed to be an inherent inclination, wherein these individuals' focus turned inward to examine the event, the ensuring changes, and the potential ramifications through reflection, meditation, writing, and prayer. Once the critical reflection segued to a more compassionate self-assessment and, then, acceptance of the Self, this introspection resulted in a "redefinition" of the existing sense of Self.

Cranton and Roy (2003) maintain that, through the process of individuation, a Jungian concept central to analytical depth psychology, we become conscious of our

unique, cognitive, psychological Self. After interviewing my participants, I view Stages 2 through 5 as representing this internal individuation process that Jung described, as cited by Campbell (1971), wherein aspects of the unconscious are integrated with the conscious. This process was a precursor for my participants to define and assume new roles that best "fit" their changed internal and external realities. Similarly, Maslow (1968/1999) spoke of "peak" spiritual events as being an "identity experience" (p. 237).

**Stage 6. Planning a course of action.** As already presented under previous stages, many of my participants mentioned that their reflection process involved making some concrete decisions and plans for action. I was interested in learning about whether or not a vision had guided them in their planning. A vision (Baugh, 2007; Becknell, 2007; Senge, 2006; Wilber, 2007) is a defined statement of an ideal future state that clarifies and guides decisions and actions for striving toward that ideal. For some, it may represent a destination; for others, it may be more of an ontological perspective. As such, it relates to life purpose. To this end, I asked the interviewees if they had thought about the future, and whether or not they had created a new intention or "vision" for the remainder of their life. To probe for further data about their courses of action, I asked about how they thought of life after their event—as a journey or a destination?

***Redefining a vision with intention to move forward.*** Christy described her and her husband planning for action, which we see was a longer-term, step-by-step, and evolving process of defining a new vision, with the intention to continue moving forward:

> We made certain decisions, ah, for the two years that we went through intensive counseling together, and myself, and then, we took it one step at a time and, clearly, our intentions changed. And our path, ahm, ended up taking us to where

> it is now. Ah, whether or not it comes to fruition, if one particular goal that we might both have, comes to fruition or not, I think we're both prepared to take whatever steps that are necessary to just continue moving forward, as long as there's forward movement. Ah, and we don't go back to old stories, old patterns, old ways of seeing things, old ways of judging, ahm, the experiences. Our intentions, yes, they did change. It's like I said, we were both prepared to . . . keep our old jobs and retire and. . . . "By golly, that's the American way; that's the American Dream! To have our house, and have our two cars, and never have to worry!" Well, ah, we both came to the realization that that is not necessarily what . . . what it takes to achieve a dream or a vision. We both have a different vision now than we had ten years ago. That's for sure.

Becky affirmed that she created a new vision for her life because of meeting her future husband. Susan did not speak about having a vision, although she clearly had in mind an intention to enjoy her new life journey for a while:

> Actually, for the past year or so, I haven't even really thought about it, worried about it, whatever. But *now*, since I *am* getting to the point where, ah, really, I *should* [sigh] try and get *some* kind of employment, I am kinda thinking, ummmm, you know, there's still some more research I have to do, though. I mean, I need to, ahm, before I can really formulate a, oh, just a definite plan? For the future? There's a couple of things I keep putting on my to-do list, and I just keep putting it off.

Susan correlated her layoff with a new perspective on life as a journey:

> I've just saw so many people that are like, their destination is, "I'm going to retire when I'm 67 years old," and blah, blah, blah. . . . "Do this, this, and this." Well, you know? Sometimes, things happen. They don't make it that long, or whatever, you know? Or, their health goes down, or whatever. And sure, they're just working, working, working until this destination. And they don't enjoy the journey. You know? They work 60, 70 hours a week and, you know, you see that in corporations a lot."

Henry clarified,

> It certainly *reinforced* my vision of life. And, it influenced, ahm, how I saw that life unfolding because, suddenly, I didn't have this person in my life anymore, when she was a large part of my motivation. So, I, I had to figure out, "Ok, so, if I'm not in this relationship, then, then what is it? How can I do that, independently, or in a new relationship?" And so, that's always unfolding, even now. It just unfolds every day. And I never know what's going to happen. What's new? I mean, relationships are dynamic. Life is dynamic.

Like Henry, Joe stated, "My vision hasn't changed. I would say it's been modified to a certain extent." Joe referenced his thought processes after being laid off:

> I think, without a destination, it's hard to journey. So, I mean, I would generally say, it's about the journey, you know? Like, I think that's the main thing of what I was going through, you know? You gotta kind of *pick* a destination. You gotta take a *shot* at something. But then, you really have to focus on that journey you're going through, you know, and making sure that the journey you wanted to do is a good one, and you're not sacrificing everything for the destination.

Kevin said, "It prompted me to approach my business in a very different way. It really did not change my life-long vision or objective." Similarly, Karen also noted a change with her approach to work that prioritizes the journey over the outcome, or destination:

> I think that, and again, this is mostly in terms of my, ah, professional life. I would say that I am more focused on the *process* of business, than I am on the results of business. And, and that has to do with, again, I'm very interested in how we do things, and in how we can do things better. How we can do things differently. I would say, before, I was more focused on a task-oriented approach.

Karen stated that did not create a new vision, so I asked if her lack of doing so was influenced any with this event. She sighed, paused, and then said, "Yes, I think so, because my mom was always, just the things that she told us, and told us about life, and . . . I think things like making sure that you get together as family, and you have fun, and you travel." Interestingly, Mark did not think in terms of a vision but, rather, "I think, more the experience. . . . I created my bucket list and retired early so I could complete that bucket list. Do all the things I've always wanted to do."

Maria was one who sees life as both a journey and a destination, affirming that her life-altering experience was a catalyst for her changed perspectives:

> It set, ah, my . . . when you get to those places where I will never go there again? And that's what it did. It created those parameters for my living to where I won't . . . I . . . I have to be true to that one part of myself. *That's* evolved a lot, especially in recent years. Especially in the last two years. I'd say that that experience started me on the journey to what I believe now, but it wasn't the

> whole, you know? I believe that life is, ahm, a little of both, I would say. It is the journey, and it is the destination. It, it's a start for each of us that are in this life and, within it, we move and learn and, you know, hopefully, well, we do, you know, learn the lessons we need to.

Claire feels strongly that life is: "About the journey. . . . In fact, that's what I often tell people, 'Even if you think you've arrived; I don't care what your goal is, you're not. There's always more that you can go and do."

***Savor the process and experience.*** Jane emphasized that life is, for her, "Oh, definitely the journey. And it used to be about the destination." She abandoned the concept of having a vision after her cancer diagnosis and treatment, although she does focus on short-term goals:

> I'll be honest with ya, ahm, there are no plans after five years. I'm really sorry. You know? There just, you know, they, . . . life is not a straight line. There you go. It *just* isn't. So I, I want to make it to Regionals. Professionally, I need to be able to get enough retirement. I've got some, you know? Who knows? I, I can't be worried about that. I know that sounds awful. But I just can't be worried about my future. I would like to go ahead and have a boyfriend again. I think that they're fun. . . . I have no vision or plan for the rest of my life. I have found out you really can't plan that far in advance. Instead, I have created goals for myself; goals such as getting back into riding; finding a 9-5 job with little stress; becoming proficient in dressage, etc. . . . I do not have a personal vision because, after hearing that I probably only had a year or two to live, it kinda renders a "Personal Life Vision" obsolete.

Jane also expressed that, for her, it is more of an intention to focus on one goal at a time, and to savor that journey, which is a well-known construct within the field of positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2001; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). She correlated having one life "passion" with goal achievement and self-worth, elaborating on a struggle with her new philosophy of prioritizing the process and experience of *attempting* to achieve a goal, versus attaining it:

> Making it to Regionals . . . is *so* important to me. I cannot tell you; it's like a life goal. I don't, and I was actually talking to my instructors about it, 'cuz I firmly believe that, with goals, you know, you have to be good without *attaining* that goal. Because, if you're not good enough without attaining it, then you're not going to be good enough when you attain it, you know? And, and, and, I mean, I've, I've, I was in tears right before the show, because I could not decide if I was going to be good enough without it. And, you know, I, I am gonna start crying again [emotional]. I don't *know* if I'm going to be good enough without going to Regionals. *I don't know.* And it, it's, it's killing me. . . . It is a culmination of, of, I feel like God gives you one passion. . . . I don't know if I will be good enough without it. *I don't know*.

I asked Jane if, before this event, she had had goals like this, or if she had been vision-oriented then. She stated, "I had it all worked out. Ahm, to where I was going to be a very wealthy person, yes. And I was well on my way [laugh]." Although Glenn did not speak of having a life vision, he made changes to his goals and, like Jane, now prioritizes the process of "playing," over "winning":

I changed my, ah, goal, my vocation in life. Before that, I wanted to be a geologist, and I'd put a deposit on a, on a dorm room at Texas Tech University and, ah, after that, I decided I wanted to, ah, do something else in life. . . . I decided that serving God was the most important thing in my life. . . . I changed my whole direction, my goals in life. . . .

I've lived my whole life differently because of that. It meant a change of behavior. It meant a change of goals. It meant of change of the way I spent my time. Ah, and *who* I spent my time with. . . . I think life is more of a journey than it is a destination. I think, ah, *playing* is more important than winning the game. The process and the experience is what's important. . . . And the relationships."

He elaborated, "It's always an internal thing. You cannot find your happiness in your relationship with others. You cannot find your happiness in your achievement in life. Your happiness has to come from within. . . . I think life is an opportunity, a privilege, a blessing.

As far as a vision goes, Glenn elaborated,

Well, I didn't know, ah, what my life plan was going to be exactly, except I knew I was going to be a better Christian, a better person, ah, because of that event. . . . So, not a specific vision for the future at that point. But it, ah, pointed my life in the direction, which would later give me opportunity to create my vision for my life. If you think about life as the destination, then you get too frustrated.

Likewise, John said,

It is all about the journey, not the destination for me, because the destination is a whole 'nother journey. I'm trying not to be too deep, but I can't think about what

> that's going to be. You know? I just have to keep working. You only know you're at the destination when you get there. For all I know, this, *this* moment, right now, could be the destination; this could be the end. I don't know. I just have to keep working on myself, and trying to be true to myself, and to what I believe in.

Several reoccurring themes are of note in the narratives under Stage 6, including being "true" to yourself or being authentic, bettering the Self, and continuing to move forward. An important finding embedded in most of the interviewees' narratives is how the changes that came after their sudden, life-altering event are ongoing, their self-identity is ever evolving, and life is dynamic, which correlates with their changed philosophies about life being a journey, rather than a destination. Perhaps this shift explains the general lack of visioning or, even, long-term planning. These findings led me to probe my participants about time orientation.

***More present-moment time orientation.*** Many of my participants stated that they did, in fact, change their time orientation because of their sudden, life-altering event, which I see as a serendipitous and important finding. Specifically, these individuals feel as though they are now more focused on today, have left the past behind, and do not have expectations for tomorrow. While this philosophy is somewhat of a popular conception in modern culture, I feel it is telling for these particular individuals, who are of diverse ages and backgrounds. In my view, it indicates that they now "seek" less and are more content with and appreciative of their lives in the here and now. For instance, Christy expressed that her "ultimate priorities for life now are to live, live for the day, to enjoy as

many moments of the day as I possibly can with the man that I love. And to know that he could be . . . out of my life in a heartbeat." Becky discussed being more aware:

> You know, I think it did, yeah, I mean, *really*. When I met [my future husband] and his parents, they lived a lot more in the present than my own family had. To this day, you know, going somewhere with my in-laws and [my husband], I still get this experience that there is so much going on around me that I'm not aware of. . . . And, so, it's constantly shown to me, ahm, that I was living in a very small circle of my mind, and that there was so much more going on around me at that moment. So, yeah, I would say that, where I am now, ahm, with being more present-oriented, and being more aware, and constantly working on being more aware, is a direct result of that experience.

Karen voiced,

> Yeah, I think it did, but I'm not sure that I can quantify it in what way. I think, ahm, yeah, I might spend more time valuing the moment and not letting things, relationships, or things go out longer, now. I might *because* it might not be there in the future.

Susan expressed a need while working to look to the future, which she no longer feels:

> I guess I am kinda living in the moment. Just living, day by day, enjoying each day, ahm, . . . whereas, before, I don't know. I mean, before, you know, when you work long hours and all that, it's just like . . . sometimes you just don't even enjoy the day, you know [laugh]? "Get through it, get through it, get through it." Get through it as quick as possible, you know?

Anthony observed,

I do have my long-term goals that I set for myself, and I am always striving towards them but, I feel that I *am* more focused on the moment because, and being very, ah, happy for . . . for . . . just, you know, waking up, and having a roof over my head, having money in my bank account. Ah, that certainly has had an impact on my life and my perspectives on things, through this event. . . . I think that, before, I used to be kind of impulsive in a lot of things. I'd just do it for the sake of doing it. But now, I recognize that I don't need to rush things so much, and I can let things happen naturally. Ahm, you know, there's certain things at our house that are still there the way that [my brother] left it, that . . . I'm respecting. Ahm, my mom and my dad, too, not just myself, and making it something that the three of us will decide to do someday. But, for now, we're, we're ok with the way things are. There's a lot of just patience now, for sure, I think, that has taken place and has shown me that, as long as you're happy and healthy every day, and being positive with people and supporting people, it will all turn out good in the end.

Much like Anthony, Maria recognized a new appreciation of the present:

It gave me a new appreciation of the now. I wouldn't have used that term then but, I see it, you know, as, ahm, it's definitely the way that I became. It's the, ahm, you know, "That was then," you know? "*Someday*, I'm going to . . . and it's going to be *that*." "I don't have that now but, you know, maybe I will." It changed to: "This is where I am now, and I want to enjoy it." Because, I don't know where I'm going tomorrow.

Kevin stated, "I would say that, ahm, for most of my life, I've been a very future-oriented person. And I am much more in the moment now, and whether that's from my experience or whether that's from getting older, I can't tell you [laugh]." Much like Kevin, Alice voiced,

> I think I've arrived at a point of loving the present moment and, ah, you know, becoming older and [laugh] dealing with ailments related to aging, all of that. Ahm, I, I don't know what the future will be, actually. So I would say that the present moment is very precious.

I asked Alice if any of her sudden, life-changing events instilled that new appreciation in her, and she reiterated, "Oh, yeah, I feel like I've overcome a lot of obstacles, and, ahm, that makes me feel very good." Joe described now having two orientations, and that being "centered" in the moment, appreciating it, and being grateful for what he has today has helped him remain focused on his values and priorities in life:

> I think, from my weakness or, I don't know if it's a weakness, but I do dwell a lot on the future. I'm always interested in, like, the potential, and I'm really interested in pursuing dreams that I always have. I'm always soaking in, and imagining, you know, where I can go with things. Ahm, but, with that said, within the last two or three years, I've *really* been trying to live my life more in the moment. Ahm, and that's where I kinda feel like that's where I can recognize what's working for me and what isn't. By living in the moment, and by just listening, you know, "I'm *happy*, I'm *good*, I'm *healthy*, I'm not hungry, and I don't have any major injuries," and just being able to recognize that everything's ok.

Jane correlated her change in time orientation with learning to enjoy the process and the experience in the aftermath of her event:

> I very much live in the present, . . . and, it's very interesting because I'm no longer multi-tasking, I've noticed. And when I say multi-tasking, taking on multiple goals. And I don't know why. And I've been sitting there thinking about this, believe it or not, and, the only thing I can come up with, . . . no, that's not. . . . It's, I don't want to stress myself too much. I want to actually enjoy the experience. And this is the only thing I can come up with, and then I feel really guilty about enjoying it. I guess I've *learned* how to do that, to enjoy these individual experiences, because it's no longer about attaining monetary things. So, you know, one of the takeaways for me is that I have been feeding myself; feeding my soul. . . . It's more of a wanting to focus on one journey or path, and to relish it and savor it.

Mark also indicated a change in time orientation, in that he took more risks in life, both financially and athletically.

***Summary of Stage 6.*** All of the interviewees articulated now feeling that life is about the journey, although a few pointed out that they feel the destination is important, as well, which represents their vision or goals. Their viewpoints illustrate that people have differing conceptualizations of the term, "destination." Overall, however, few of the interviewees mentioned redefining a vision after their life-altering event, which I thought was significant. It might seem natural to change one's vision with a significant change in life circumstances, health, lifestyle, career, social status, etc. Nonetheless, many of the interviewees discussed having an intention, plan, or a goal, even a "life goal," all of

which I compare to a vision. Possibly, those individuals had never considered defining a life vision in the first place, or were not familiar with the construct. Those participants who were confronted with their mortality mentioned a natural reticence to plan because they felt they did know how many tomorrows they would have, and were now much more concerned with short-term goals, and with living and "savoring" each day to the fullest. In fact, several of the participants' narratives reveal a common theme about how they now realize, because of their event, that life is dynamic and evolving. What is also of interest that emerged here is a related desire to simplify life and work, which can be thought of as a mission step to achieve an overall life plan or vision.

All in all, this stage of planning a course of action represents an emerging sense for my participants of the gift of today without expectations about tomorrow, and is indicative of a more "relaxed" notion about making concrete, long-term plans. Instead, we can perceive a transition beginning, from a healing perspective to one of learning that embraces a positive appreciation and gratitude for the beneficial outcomes. This phenomenon was studied by Lechner, Tennen, and Affleck (2009), who refer to growth from adverse events as benefit-finding growth, or BFG.

**Stage 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plan.** Although there was a seemingly general reluctance from some of the interviewees to specify that they had a "plan," as previously discussed, and many denied defining a new vision, the majority described seeking information about their situation, health conditions, and future opportunities. Specific steps they took in this stage involved conducting research online, going through therapy and couples counseling, trying out new jobs and careers, moving or changing their living situations, or starting new

educational journeys. Susan confirmed that, before she retired, she: "did a lot of research before I made the decision." Alice explained the importance of research to her:

> It was sort of like, "Ok, this is a brain disorder; it's not my dad making my mom go crazy." And, so, I was [sigh] very interested in all of the research going on in brain chemistry and, ah, . . . [sigh] the ramifications of, ahm, . . . just that whole association. That took a long time, I mean, that was a long-term process, learning about that. And then eventually becoming, ahm, as I told you before, I, what I'm learning here, I need to pass on to other people, and that's why I took on that leadership role. . . . There was so much research that was going on, and that was *huge*."

John, who faced a potentially fatal health issue, said,

> I *studied* and *learned* all the options. Ahm, I have always been this way to a point, but I'm now *much* more diligent about it. Just because the doctor said, "A is A" doesn't necessarily mean that I'll believe it, until I'm done with researching it myself. And that is a big change for me.

Jane, who also faced a life-threatening diagnosis, pointed out that information played both a beneficial and a negative role for her:

> It's "35 years of experience tells me that's cancer." So then, I went to doctor number *3*. And, he looked at me, and he goes, "You have breast cancer. *Yeah*." He says, "You've got cancer *there*. But I don't know what's *there*." And I said, "You are *hired*." He says, "Experience *tells* me that it *is* cancer. But I can't tell you for sure." And I said, "Well we're gonna find out for sure, 'cuz I'm gonna tell you, it's not cancer." He said, "We will find out, but I'm telling you it's

cancer." Alright! So then I had *another* biopsy . . . immediately. And, four days later, my doctor calls me up [different tones of voice used]: "My name is Ted." "Ted, Ted! How's it going?" He goes, "I have news." I said, "Really?" And he said, "You know that spot that you said wasn't cancer and I said *was* cancer?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "It's called 'sclerosing adenosis.'" So, about that point, I said, "Spell that." So, I Googled it. . . . That was the other big thing. So, you need information to a point. But at some point, enough is enough, and you need to move on. . . . You can no longer look at the, ahm, the survival rates. And then, and that's what I was . . . it's very interesting, you know, that, "Am I getting it right?" "What am I doing?" And, "Is this right?" Ahm, I would just go to the survival rates, ok? "But I don't believe those survival rates. Maybe, I'm not gonna be in the 20-year. Maybe, I'm gonna be in the 10-year. Ohhhh, but maybe you got it wrong, and I'm in the 5-year."

I asked Jane if she also sought information about how to fight her cancer: "No, shocking, but true. No. Just [laugh], ah huh, just about the treatment. Ahm, 'Did they get it right?' Ahm, looking up every single word in the pathology report, over and over and over again." She said this obsessive cognitive rumination went on for: "Years [laugh]! *Years*. You have to break yourself of it."

Joe explored different career paths that were more true to his dreams:

That immediate shock from, you know, of getting laid off, then choosing to go to another path, and you're kind of forced to learn a whole lot real fast. . . . Mainly, my whole life, I was basically *groomed* to fit some white collar job and, when that

didn't happen, I kind of had to start from scratch and learn new skills all over again.

Maria was laid off on a Friday. She recalled,

That Monday, I went for unemployment, and, ahm, they had information there about all the different careers, and what kind of education is needed for those careers, and then, another set of data that said what's the starting pay for those careers. And, then, there was information there about, it was [School] at the time, what degrees they offered, so I started looking, and I found out which ones were in demand—diagnostics radiography—very much in demand, two years to get the degree. I could do two years in school. [School] offered the degree, you come out starting at $20 an hour, and it goes up. "That will do it," you know, so that's what I did. And the following Monday, I was in school [laugh]. And I haven't stopped.

***Summary of Stage 7.*** I see Stage 7 as part of Stage 6, wherein my participants explored new courses of action through acquiring knowledge and skills to forge new paths in life. The one interesting exception was Jane, who described becoming obsessed with information about her condition and treatment, but not about how to strengthen herself to fight her cancer. All of the participants' actions, though, including Jane's, depict self-directed, discovery learning, which many stated has continued over their lifetime, much like what they said about their reflective practice. As with Stage 6, I read in many of the participants' words the beginnings of feeling positive about the new possibilities, even, opportunities, for learning and change that they now saw before them.

**Stage 8. Trying new roles.** I view some aspects of this stage as another form of acquiring knowledge and skills. Several of my participants discussed how they went down some avenues before settling on one, continuing their discovery learning journeys. This stage depicts a key transition for the individuals I interviewed, and extends beyond the idea of merely trying new roles. Rather, it involves taking action, behaviorally "moving forward" to try new roles by making substantial changes in their lives, in response to their redefined self-identity, impacting every aspect of their home and work, in many cases. For example, to manage her immediate new reality with "clarity," Christy made significant behavioral changes prior to her initial reflective stage, as well as other substantial changes after:

> We lived away from each other for, goodness, two, threeeee months, at least, while we were, ah, in counsel. . . . Right after my husband left, I didn't smoke marijuana again. It stopped right then and there. I don't know if that was a conscientious thing? I had marijuana at the time, and I dumped it. I just dumped it. It's as if I, kind of, again, wanted to find some *thing* to put my finger on to blame. And to me, it was, "I've got to get rid of this stuff, whatever it is, that is interfering with my ability to think straight." To, to actually take a look at the entire situation. And it dawned on me that, using drugs and, and using a chemical could impair the judgment that I might have at a *critical* point in my relationship with my husband, with my family, with my friends, with the people I worked with. Additionally, I made a decision, on my own, that I was going to change careers.

Becky made "an intellectual change, political change, a kind of religious change . . . ahm, socially, of course. I can't think of a way in which my life didn't change, except that I still was involved in school." It was almost as though Maria had been asleep or on automatic pilot before her life-altering event. Like Becky, she cited many changes:

> Self-identity, lifestyle, all kinds of changes. Monetary changes. . . . Just, finding something that I could do that, ahm, would allow me to continue at the time, but earn what I needed to earn. It was a challenge, you know, and still support my family, because I didn't get any child support, so it was just me; I didn't go on welfare, or anything. It took me a few months to actually do everything. I changed all the furniture around. . . . I started gardening; my yard had been dirt before that. . . . I lived for *them* then. And now, it's *my* home. It's my *life*. My life is my home.

***Helping others.*** Karen said she focused on**:**

> Making sure I stayed even closer with family, ahm, some family members that I didn't talk to as much on a regular basis. Ahm, I do *more* now, you know, about trying to keep family together, and then helping other people that I see that have lost a loved one close, and in similar situations.

Later in our conversation, Karen spoke about one of her dogs:

> She's a certified therapy dog, and the biggest thing we do is go to the library and do the reading program. . . . The reason I do that is because, ahm, my mom was a huge reader. And, so, we kind of do it to honor my mom, and to pay it forward.

Similar to Karen, Kevin described role changes he made to give back and help others:

> What I have found over the last same period of time is that there are people who are open to that kind of thing and, so, I've developed kind of an on-the-side mentoring relationship, which is very ad hoc, where people will kind of, especially young adults, will come into my life, and will have need of and be seeking this kind of coaching and mentoring, and so I offer that. And, so, I have had the chance to give back and help other people, ah, in some of the same ways I was helped.

Joe tried on several new roles that were more true to his dreams, soon after being laid off and recovering from a brief period of shock:

> I kind of, right away, ahm, just starting thinking about different career paths that I could go down that would, you know, ultimately end up achieving that dream that I set for myself. Ahm, one of those paths that I initially took was becoming a teacher. So I got hired on to do that and, before the semester started, I had been substitute teaching. That's kind of what I jumped into right away. I got the job as substitute teacher to get cash, to get income again, ahm, and then, kind of pursued that teaching interest. Ahm, I did real well on the interviews, they hired me, they loved me and, then, I just, I didn't really like where our educational system was going. I didn't believe in all the standardized tests, and how they were treating kids, and how they were running school. It wasn't what *I* was used to. . . . And then, I just kind of dropped that and, you know, went straight for the farming thing. I decided that I really wanted to be a farmer; I wanted to be basically outside and working with plants, ahm, and doing work that I felt was meaningful.

Claire described her exponential change process and emerging desire to take on new roles in teaching and helping others, which is a finding in common with many of the participants:

> He [dog] had an event where he had a skin problem. . . . I fell back into complacency, and to what I was comfortable with, and took him in to the vet, put him on antibiotics, and he had an allergic reaction to it. Several hundred dollars later, and more vet bills, and emergency care, he was worse. So, I began to really, I said, "No more of this. I am done with this. I am going to look into this. And I started searching out, and found an ancient healing organization. . . . Through that process, you know, I began using, ahm, therapeutic-grade essential oils, and I started raw feeding, and got him off all that. . . . And, that was what began my journey, and I said, "I have to share what I'm learning with others." And so I began blogging [laughter]. This was back in 2000 when *nobody* was blogging other than the geeks, right? Later, I learned all about that technology, as a result of having to teach so many people about blogging. Too, I joined a women's chamber of commerce online. I've met a lot of people, people I'm still, today, friends with, still network with. Ahm, and then, I decided, "You know what? I don't have enough education to teach what I want to teach. Even though I *know* that I know, I need a formal education." So I went back and got a degree in animal naturopathy and also in human naturopathy. It was crazy, ahm [laugh], all the education, and trying to work at the same time, and networking, and building my business, and learning about how to, and I did this all online. During this whole process, I coauthored a book with a veterinarian that I met. And then I met

> who is now my best friend and also colleague. We began teaching together and doing a podcast together, and we are still doing that today. So, in other words, because of this dog, and because of what I was learning from him, I just needed to allow that to come out and share with others. . . . And, so, ahm, as a result of that, I just, it, it *expanded*, you know? . . . If I had not kept that dog, if he had not come into my life, I don't think I would have, we would be talking today, because it, . . . it turned me in a completely different direction. I walked away from the status quo and the medical paradigm, and . . . went full force into holistic, natural naturopathic care for humans and animals. And, as a result, my own health greatly improved, because I had battled asthma and allergy and lung problems my entire life. And, when I changed, when I learned about whole health for humans and how to help *myself* be well, in the process, it was my dog, Shadrach, that caused me to want to do this. It was *him*. It was this *sick, abused, starving dog*, and I'd never had any kind of dog like that, like I said before, in my life. *Completely* changed it and turned it around, and opened up a new world for me, and allowed me to meet a whole new set of people, a whole new set of ideals, a whole . . . different way of thinking and living my life. And for the better.

For Alice, it took a couple of years to absorb and discovery-learn before she blossomed to take on leadership roles. She shared her "evolution" of the new roles she assumed to teach, lead, and mentor others:

> I got very, very involved with NAMI. Ahm, I eventually became a board member here. . . and, then, at the national level. . . . You know, it was like, "This is *home*; these are people that know what I've been through, and I know what they've been

through to some extent." So it's a huge, *huge* connection, and I just devoured information, ahm, at those conferences. . . . I became the state coordinator. At the time, the program was called Journey of Hope, and there was an educational component and a support group component. . . . I visited cities all over [State] to try to get people interested in signing up to become teachers. And then, I taught a couple of courses myself. So, ahm, that was huge in the sense that, ahm, it was so satisfying to see people come to these courses, and begin to open up about what they were going through. And they were parents of, you know, young people who were ill, and sisters, and brothers, and, ahm, adult children. And just to see the relief that they experienced by being able to talk about their experiences. And so, ahm, I just . . . that was *such* a special time for me.

***Redefining success.*** John discussed role changes in terms of how he redefined success:

My personality hasn't changed. My core being hasn't changed. What *has* changed is those parts of me that I choose to focus and reflect on. *That's* what's changed. . . . I'm the same person that I've always been. I have a lot of parts of me that I now celebrate, to be out, where I hid them before because they, . . . I *perceived* them as showing signs of weakness. Ahm, I allowed myself to . . . hear what society was saying was success and what was not successful, and I strove real hard to be that person and not be the person who I truly am. . . . I was striving for people to look at me and say, "He's successful because he wears a suit to work." Because I grew up in a blue-collar neighborhood so, if you wear suits to work, and I did, you know, it was really cool. And . . . I really let what I did

> define me. And, it didn't matter if, you know, every job, you're part of something else. I mean, it didn't matter what that something else was, you know? Now, it *matters*. My first career, I worked in public accounting, ahm, you know, and I had various support positions. But, what was I doing? I was helping a huge corporation, a giant machine, help people cheat on their taxes, and make money off the backs of other people's money. Oh, but I didn't think about it at the time, because I was focused on my part, just doing my part and, you know? What a useless waste, unless you're fascinated by numbers because, you know, a lot of accountants that are really great people, they love it. They *love* it. I *didn't* love the end product. Now, the end product is important to me. I'm still content to do my portion. But a portion of an end product that I can value.

Like John, several of the participants spoke about how their attitude toward work changed, as well as what defined success for them after their event, and how the importance of finding work where they felt their role had meaning became a new priority. These responses prompted me to learn about whether or not my participants' events and their new roles in life and work had any impact on their conceptualization of their life purpose.

***Evolving life purpose impact.*** Many of the participants stated that their sudden, life-changing event did not affect their life purpose, or expressed not knowing what that was. A few, however, did feel their event influenced their life purpose, which they now understand to be an evolving construct, such as Christy, who shared:

> It wasn't immediate. Again, it took a good two years, ah, plus, to decide that the trail or the path that I was on, ahm, wasn't necessarily the path that was making

> me the most happy. And, so, changes were made. Ahm, in terms of what my husband and I ended up doing with our lives. Ahm, and so, . . . I, I wouldn't say that there was an immediacy to it. It takes time. It takes time, and it *continues* to happen. I mean, to this *day*.

Similarly, Joe explained,

> I feel like I have a much better grasp of my life, you know, of what I *should* be doing. I guess I've also learned that I shouldn't assume that I've figured things out. That was probably one of the main things that I learned. I *don't* have all the answers. And I've kinda of just learned to, you know, try and push my ego aside, and, and that well of consciousness, that part of my consciousness, and just kind of, like, *listen* to more of how, you know, what makes me smile, and what truly brings happiness, and truly has that real value in my life. I know I should kind of look past all the materialistic and ego-centered sort of ideals, and I think I've done a much better job, like pulling that unconscious and, you know that desire of my true self out.

Likewise, John shared, "It's a process that I am still engaged in. My life purpose remains constant, but the opportunities for expressing it change as I do." Becky was one of the few who affirmed that her event directed her life purpose: "Yeah, I, I think, as far as what I would do in the outer world, *yes*. Ah, teaching, and, ah, becoming educated, *yes*. I really had no idea of that before." Jane said she did not feel that she had a life purpose before her event, but now she does: "I am here to help people. And I am really good at this. . . . I'm here to make them happy, yes I am." Anthony too discovered his life purpose after the loss of his brother:

> Before this happened, it was more, considering it . . . going to school, getting a PhD, while working a full-time job, was kind of just, for me. But, when I lost him, I saw it as a reason to finish, so that I can make my family proud and to make [my brother] proud. Because some of the things that I'm studying in school, that interest me, for example, the games, *that* was a sort of hobby in [my brother's] life, because he was into video games, and he was a very light-hearted person. So, it inspires me to, ahm, pursue these sorts of ventures because, in so many ways, he had an influence on *me*, and it made me *realize* that I was doing it for *him*, in so many ways, too. So, it certainly *has* inspired me to do the best I can in every single thing I do, not only just for school, but a lot of other things, too. To make him proud, and make my parents proud, and make our family proud; to *always* be the *positive* person, and the sort of person that can inspire people, look after people, make them feel good about themselves. I would say, definitely, it had a impact on me and transformed me to, ahm, lead that type of life.

Anthony also described feeling more confident after his event, which was in common with several other participants. Like Christy, he remarked how conceptualizing his life purpose from his sudden, life-changing event, was not immediate:

> I would say that the realization took some time to evolve because, ahm, when it first happened, I was just really looking at the immediate needs for our family, and trying to be the strong pillar for everybody. But, as time progressed and I started to . . . move forward in other things, and, and have other opportunities land in my life, I'd always think about my brother and, ahm, how he was more than likely very proud of me and what I did. So, I think, with each door that opens for

> me, that I feel that my perspective on everything gets more solidified. And, a lot more confident in my, ah, perceptions and my attitude about a *lot* of things.

Claire described how the dog she adopted was an important messenger for her:

> I'm just really glad that [sigh] he came crashing into my life and destructed it the way he did [laugh]. . . . That's why his name was so apropos, too. . . . I really do feel that Shadrach was placed in my life, by God, for this very purpose. And, yeah, I have *found* my purpose and, honestly, I wouldn't *continue,* if this wasn't my purpose.. . . . If I was all about fame and fortune, in other words, then I would not continue doing this. But I *do* it because this is my life purpose. And it's . . . something I'm extremely passionate about, and Shadrach will *always* be in my heart to *remind* me. . . . It's like a legacy that he left for me, to do what I do. And, I do know, as a result of me continuing, that other people are learning and taking up and passing on what they learn, and so forth, so. Many animals benefit, and people benefit, as a result. So, it's *one dog*.

Unlike most of the participants who said the conceptualization of their life purpose after their event was a longer-term process, Glenn said he "definitely" realized his life purpose about six months after his life changing experience: "It came because the event changed the course of my life—from an inward to an outward perception, from a personal to a more social, from a physical to a more spiritual one."

***Transformed ultimate priorities for life.*** To explore the correlations with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943) and motivating factors as related to trying new roles, I asked the participants what they believed their ultimate life priorities were, before the event and after. As mentioned previously under

the time orientation discussion, Christy expressed transformed priorities for living in the present with a new sense of appreciation and wellbeing:

> My ultimate priorities for life now are to *live*, live for the *day*, to enjoy as many moments of the day as I possibly can with the man that I love. And to know that he could be . . . out of my life in a heartbeat. I worry ah, about losing my father. I worry about losing my mother, my brothers. I worry about losing my grandmother, my grandfather, my best friends. I worry about these things, so my, ahm, my priority is to live it as best as I can, without getting into that obsessive, if-then type of stuff. I try to enjoy as much as I can, in the . . . time that I have. And that means even the simplest of things, like walking my dog. I have learned that, my priority is, things are going to happen regardless of what I do. . . . I want to live my life, and I want to *become*, to *continue* to become. Whatever that might end up being.

Christy's reference to "becoming" is, again, indicative of individuation, as discussed under Stage 5. Maslow wrote much about the construct of "becoming," in relation to the self-actualization level of his hierarchy (1943, 1968/1999). Karen prioritizes family now:

> I think, one of the things my mom always said was how important family was. And, I see that even more now. I was the oldest child, and I really try and plan things with the immediate family, and keep everybody together, and make sure everyone stays in touch, and, ahm, keep up that communication and those kind of family things.

Much like Christy, John, Joe, and Jane, Susan prioritizes a different way of life where she can be more true to herself:

> I need to make a *little* bit of *money* but, ahm, and it's something maybe I enjoy doing, you know? Could be something that's more, more meaningful, and just more . . . pleasant, just, ah, with people who are not, ahm, oh [sigh], greedy and competitive, yeah, there you go, *competitive*. It was the competition and, and the, ah, just, ahm, the competition was *really* a drag [laugh] in the corporate world, you know? To . . . enjoy life, and get out of it what I can, while I can. While I'm still *able*. And, to not *ever* get myself into a position where I *hate* my job, where, you know, I'm unhappy. 'Cuz, ah, I don't know. To me, if you *hate* your job, you're, it's gotta affect the rest of your life, you know? I mean, how can you be happy in all areas of your life, if a major part of your life, you really hate, you're really unhappy? I just feel like being content and happy, and living simpler and, ah, living more, ah, low key, and not so very busy, crazy, stressful, is the way to go. . . . You know, it's just funny. I mean, I happened to fall into working at a big corporation a long time ago, and I never, even though I'm mostly, the whole 30 years or whatever I worked for big corporations, I *hate* big corporations, I *hate* computers [laugh], and I always worked on computers in big corporations! And, it's just, like, "Gosh." I mean, I don't regret it in the sense that now, actually, it worked out ok because now I'm living a life I like a lot better, because I'm able to have this pension from a big corporation, you know what I'm saying [laugh]? But, but [sigh], it's, ah, I'm just so *glad* I *finally*, I'm so *glad* that this event, this

> life event finally forced me out of it. It gave me an opportunity, in a *good* way, to get out of the corporate life, you know?

As with many of the other participants, Joe now prioritizes helping or make something for others, and continues a reflective journaling process to keep him on track with his priorities:

> I still have lots of interests, and I still have new things that are always popping up that I want to pursue and, ahm, yeah, I'm just kind of cruising, seeing where it's going to take us but, yeah, I like, just kind of journal it. I figured out that I really enjoy producing stuff. So, I'm interested in any form of career where I'm helping someone or making something for someone.

Mark shared, "I think before, I mean, we were pretty young, so it was just, 'go with the flow.' Ah, I think after, I took the attitude that, 'I'm gonna enjoy every second, no matter what. I'm not gonna be afraid to take chances.' Those types of things." Alice, too, expressed priorities and goals in life that focus on others, and felt that she had moved to the self-actualization level because of her life-altering events. Before that, she said, her needs were: "definitely at the bottom of the hierarchy, which had to do with safety and, ahm, security. . . . It's just, surviving, you know. . . . And, I think . . . it was that whole thing about feeling that I needed, remember the face-cracking stuff that I told you about? Ahm, I think that was surviving." Later on, Alice said with laughter,

> I hope someday I can write something that will be published but, ahm, I gotta get rid of all the junk in my house. . . . That's really, you know, it's like sharing my experience with others. Sharing my career experience with others. Talking about my research that has not been conducted. Ahm, that is my immediate goal.

> Eventually, I would like, well, and I'm assuming that I will hook up with other people in the profession who have published, and maybe we can co-publish.

Alice said her husband had asked her when she went into a PhD program, "What do you want to do? Why are you doing this?" And Alice responded,

> I want to do it for my mom. Ahm, because she was not able to [emotional]. I'm getting teary. Because she was not able to fulfill her dreams. Ahm, and she had *such* potential [sigh]. Yeah, she wanted to get a doctorate [deep breath]. She wanted to, initially, she wanted to become an MD. . . . She became secondary. She put my dad through his doctoral program, and worked and paid the bills, and ah, so maybe that's where it all comes, gets tied in together, and she couldn't fulfill her dream because she became subordinate to my dad's dream.

With her event, Jane moved from the belonging and self-esteem levels to the upper levels of self-actualization and self-transcendence. She explained, "Material things matter less than personal fulfillment. That's how it changed. I went more for happiness, inner peace, and contentment, rather than for money. 'Cuz I, you know, I was working at a place where I could have made a tremendous amount of money, had I stayed." Before her cancer diagnosis, Jane said her priorities in life were:

> Oh, just making money! I was working at an internet firm, making a shit-load of money, taking people on all-expense-paid vacations, paying cash for a freakin' car, writing checks for cars. Now how sick is that one? That's sick! I did it! Not a problem! Ahm, went to, ahm, actually, two—it was really fabulous—I paid for me and two of my friends to go down to one of the beaches, the Hedonism, where it was like all you can freakin' drink. Oh, my God. Oh, my God. How great was

> that one? That was six days, and five nights that I don't really quite remember [laugh]. And you think I didn't deserve the damn cancer? Of course I did! There was never a "why me?" [laugh] I knew why! [laugh] . . . Not a *care* in the world. Ahm, just spending money, hand over fist. It was fabulous. Fabulous jewelry. It was just great. I had, it was a great time. But then, well, then, that happened, and then you're like, "God, Jesus," you know? "Is this all that I want to be?" And I said, "noooo." I wished for more. And not, not for the success, but to be a better human being. I was a *very shallow* human being.

After her event, Jane's priorities changed from being in the fast lane to a life characterized by inner peace and helping others:

> I don't care. I have . . . an almost perfect thoroughbred mare. And when I tell you that's an ego booster, you just don't even know. Now, does society care that I have the most perfect thoroughbred mare? No. And the discipline that I'm in, do they care? No. They disdain my thoroughbred mare. . . . She brings out the very best in me. Ahm, and, she brings out the ego in me, which, believe it or not, I very rarely allowed myself to have, especially with horses. I was always told, "I was not good enough." My horses were never good enough. . . . And, that's what it's all about now, for me. It's no longer about winning; it's all about the process. It's about making myself *better*; it's about making my *horse* better. . . . That's why I got this dog. It's not about the pedigree. It's all about *helping* her. When I got Darla, I got her out of a rock pile. She needed help. All my animals have needed help. . . . It bring outs the best in me, because I have to be patient with everything. 'Cuz my animals all come with problems. Every last one of them has

a problem. And, ahm, so I have to figure it out, and it's really an intellectual thing. I have to figure out how to *help* them. . . . *I* feel better. . . . Well, there's two parts to it. When you're dealing with a troubled animal, you have to force yourself to have inner peace. You cannot be the wacky, wild, hyper thing that I, I normally like to be. You must have the inner peace. . . . So, ahm, I force myself to be very peaceful and, then we go and we do our little training. Ahm, especially with Helen Red, with the dog, I have to, you know, really sit there and think about, "Ok, I have to take deep breaths," and then we go and, you know, and I have to have *patience*. That's another thing. That's a very wonderful thing about dealing with troubled animals. . . . I've changed my priorities, which is not money anymore. . . . Family's important. Your Self is important. Your animals are important. Your immediate surroundings are important. Your friends are important. Good food is important. Good wine is important. *Life* is important.

***Simplifying life.*** Jane made contextual, behavioral, and value changes in her life that depicted a need to simplify her home and life, so that she could prioritize what she really valued: "Oh, it's *much* simpler. Much, much, much simpler." Before her sudden, life-altering event, she said, "I had shit everywhere. Oh, my God. It was awful. Just chotskies[11], chotskies, chotskies. … [softly] "No, . . . don't want it." I asked Jane what she thought contributed to that change specifically, and she said, "I don't know. I just don't know. I just needed . . . maybe, it was just the fact that I needed more time to go spend and have fun. To be with my dog, be with my horse, be with my family." Later, Jane said she also decreased her drinking. Still later, she cited another change in

[11]A Yiddish word that refers to knickknacks.

priorities: "I no longer live to work; I work to live." Very much like Jane, Glenn was fulfilling belonging and self-esteem needs prior to his life-altering event. He said with a laugh,

> I didn't have any priorities. I was just a carefree person. . . . Before, I think my idea of success was just being popular with people and making money. But, afterwards, it was more of the spiritual, ah, matter of being successful. I still wanted to *relate* to people, but not necessarily seeking popularity as a, as a self-serving thing. . . . In a sense, it's, ah, ah, simpler because my priorities—I know what my priorities are—they're very clear. My priorities are to serve God. . . . Well, I was always a religious person, and I had a religious experience before that, so I suppose it was probably in part of there all along but, the importance of it was magnified so much in my experience. Ah, and I suppose the church and my family probably helped nurture me in my spiritual life, before that, but, ah, it was primary in my life, but it wasn't my number *one* priority before that. Before the event, my priorities were primarily myself, money, and getting whatever I could from everybody else. Getting what *I* needed or wanted out of them [laugh]. But, after that, of course, I looked at other people and life in a different way. . . . Now, my idea of success is, ah, serving God and serving other people. And all the implications that means, being a good member of society and the community at large. . . . So, my priorities for life now are to continue to serve God and help others, the very best I can, and especially in a spiritual way.

***The deadline as the ultimate inspiration.*** John made many contextual and behavioral changes that are now more true to his priorities, wants, and needs in life**:**

Oh, I took much better care of my health. That's the big one. Ahm, I'm much better, you know, go to a lot more doctors' appointments. I keep on my medicine. . . . I've also, . . . I work very hard to keep stress out of my life, which, in our society, is very hard to do, but there's a lot of stressful situations I would find myself in or put myself in that I now completely avoid. . . . I moved 1400 miles away from my family. . . . It wasn't healthy for me, because of who I am and who they are. I'm not saying that they're bad people. I'm just saying that the way we interact was not healthy for me. . . . I avoid negative people. I used to have a larger collection of friends in my life or people in my life, and would keep people on for a variety of reasons. I also, when I meet someone, if I don't have the gut feeling of, "This is a good person," then I don't pursue any kind of relationship, because I, up until I got physically healthy again, I tended to be a negative person. It really was, in fact, impacting my physical and emotional health, and so I have to be more diligent, and I am. So, I *am* more diligent, and I do what's right for me, not what I feel other people expect me to do. . . . I got rid of a lot. I whittled down. The big change was, ahm, a side of that also, my sister, my oldest sister, is a closed head injury survivor from a car accident. I was her caregiver or the supervisor of the caregivers for 15 years. And I was diagnosed during that period of time, and I tried to continue doing that and realized I had to take care of myself *first*. Something else caregivers know and can play at, but very few people can get good at, because we're caregivers, we're *givers* and, so, that is why I moved back to [State] to live with my friend, where I could focus on taking care of myself, and not taking care of others. That was the big change.

John elaborated on his new priorities, as a result of his sudden, life-changing event:

> I focus on, "Am I happy?" And, "What am I doing? Does it make me happy? Am I a happy person?" As a male in this culture, we were raised, at least my generation, was raised to believe you are your work. *Who* you are is what you do, and I had to separate myself from that, because what I thought was successful wasn't important to me. Driving a nice car was no longer important. Having a reliable car, nice, but also not completely important. Ahm, having a job that people looked up to me. . . . Now, what is important to me is, "Am I useful?" I feel that I can honestly say to whomever it is that's, you know, calling me home, "I tried to be a good person." And, I think, for the most part, I *was* a good person. There are people's lives who I think are better or have been enriched because of something I've said. Ahm, . . . to be healthy, and be *emotionally* healthy. That's hard. I think that's hard to do, given the family that I grew up in, and the culture I grew up in. Ah, the family, not that they were horrible people. I don't get to say my parents were alcoholics and that's why I'm damaged. My parents were good people. They went to church. They tried hard. But they too were damaged. . . . They did the best they could, with what they had. . . . I did not value myself. I thought of myself as stupid. I thought of myself as unimportant. I thought of myself in a lot of negative terms, that I've come to realize are not true, for the most part, not true, and horribly, emotionally, unhelpful. . . . This event . . . brought it all to the forefront. . . . And, it'd been a process that I'd been working on, trying to, through years of therapy and trying to get happy, to get to a place

where I honestly could say, "I'm happy." Ah, and there were a lot of little things, little things people said or did that helped me along. But I could always put it off. There was always, you know, something else more fun to do. When, all of a sudden, who knew if I really was going to live to see next week, or even tomorrow? So, if I really was going to make this a priority, I had to work on it. I had to work on it every day. . . . When I was in my 20s, I worked in public accounting, and I wore a suit every day, and I drove a really fabulous car, and I lived in a great neighborhood, and I went on wonderful vacations. And I was *so* successful. And I really didn't like my life. Because no matter how much I had, somebody else had more. And I was always envious. . . . And I realize now, money is not that important to me. . . . In terms of society, I have *downgraded* my status. Now, I'm genuinely happy. . . . I, I have a comfortable life. . . . For me, the big shift is . . . not looking for what I want, but wanting what I have. It has made my life *so* much easier. . . . I think, my grasping that there is a finite amount of time put me in a position where I really had to work at it faster if I was going to get it done . . . . The deadline being the ultimate inspiration. When the deadline is, "You really could die. If your goal *really is* to be a better person, you'd better get on the stick, because you *really could die*." In the end, what is really important to me is that I love and I am loved. And that I can let people love me, for who I am. *That* is the bottom line.

***Summary of Stage 8.*** In this stage, I perceived a notable transition in these individuals' narratives from the lower level's of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), such as safety and security, as cited by Alice, and belonging and self-esteem, as described

by Jane, John, and Glenn, to the upper levels. These individuals self-actualized, in that they now prioritize what they feel is more "true," to their inner needs, realizing less stress and greater wellbeing, and what they perceive is a better quality of life and work. These priorities reflect redefined values, which drove their actions in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering events. Indeed, several of the participants appeared to have redefined what success and wellbeing meant to them, and we see that they now hold values of a simpler, less stressful life with opportunities to help others.

Further, one impact for some of the participants was a conceptualization of their life purpose, in a process that varied from about 6 months to two years after the event itself, and which continues to evolve today. In addition to relating life purpose to changed roles in life and work, I might also relate life purpose to vision. Another pattern that emerged here is that many of the interviewees assumed the roles of teaching, leading, and mentoring others. Thus, I hold that many of the participants expressed motivation needs from the uppermost self-transcendence level of Maslow's hierarchy (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; 1943), which he was defining before he passed. The participants' changes in priorities after their events indicate that they now understand what gives them validation, "self-worth," and meaning in life. Most important, they adhered to their new priorities as they actively reconstructed their lives through the learning process to intentionally sustain that validation and meaning.

**Stage 9. Building competence and self-confidence with the new roles and relationships.** Many of the interviewees voiced that their sudden, life-changing event enhanced their courage, strength, and confidence, as Maria articulated:

> I *needed* to like, say, "Stop seeking their approval," or, you know, "Stop comparing myself by those family standards," and to say, "You don't approve of me? I don't *need* you to. That's your thing." Ahm, I'm still going to put my feet on the ground and one in front of the other. But, life is good. I'm very, *very* blessed, so. You know, that the relationships I have are good and I'm, I feel good about doing something more true.

Here again, we see the reference to living a more authentic life that is true to innermost values and needs. We also hear the metaphor of continuing to "move forward," which has been a common theme throughout all of the narratives. We arrive now at Mezirow's last transformative learning stage.

**Stage 10. Reintegrating into life with a new perspective. The metaphors.** I asked my interviewees to think of a metaphor and/or symbol to describe their sudden, life-altering event and their subsequent changes in values, priorities, beliefs, perceptions, behaviors, etc. Many initially struggled with this assignment, apparently "not used to thinking in these terms," as Susan explained, so I gave them plenty of time to think of one. As my participants' vivid, impromptu metaphors emerged, I could almost "hear" smiles in their voices, in addition to what I interpreted as a sense of gratitude. Please note that my interpretations are just that, founded on my researcher's inherent biases, my knowledge base, and my unique version of reality.

In one of her narratives, Christy presented the metaphor of a string of dominoes: when one fell over, it sent all the others falling down. That metaphor beautifully conveys the impact of her sudden, life-altering event on herself, as well as those within her circle

of family, friends, and peers. Christy shared a second metaphorical story, grounded in her present reality, in response to my direct request:

> I'm watching our tree in our front yard, slowly change its colors, into the autumn colors. And I . . . can see that there is ground, and that there is a tree, and that that tree ultimately came from a seed, and that the seed came from a tree. Ah, and, all the way back. And so, I think, a way of looking at this event is that, this was certainly, ahm, a seed that created a tree of, of decisions, a tree of paths, a tree of *changes*. And every branch and every leaf on that tree would represent all of the different changes, new stories, new ways of seeing things, that we've experienced together. And yet, at the same time, looking at the tree, I know that there are roots, and I also know that the tree wasn't there before the seed got planted, wherever it was planted, and that that seed came from something else. So, a tree before it, which came from a seed before it, which came from a tree before it. I would say that this event is much like the tree. There was a seed, and there were events that led *to* that event. And there were events that led to the events, that led to the seed of the event itself. And so, as I look at this tree, I know that, you know, it's changing, the seasons are changing, everything changes.

Interestingly, Henry's naturalistic metaphor was similar to Christy's: "The four seasons. Or maybe even Spring, more than anything. So, things change every season. Things die, and new growth grows, or some things just loose their leaves, like fruit trees, but they bear new fruit every *year*." Jane's metaphor was also one of organic growth: "Putting a magnolia twig in the earth and it blossoms into flowers." Later, she said, "You got some seed, planted them and, *wow*, it's a beautiful dogwood tree!" Kathy's metaphor,

too, conveyed regeneration: “Well, this was not a lightening bolt. Ahm, I think it was just a feeling of elation and the realization that this was somebody I could spend my life with and be very happy, and make them happy. Ahm, . . . opening of a bud.”

Initially, Mark struggled to come up with a metaphor but, then, gave one that conveyed connection and a “we” perspective: "We are Marshall—we are all one heart, all one family,” which is the theme of one of his published writings about his event. Later, Mark mentioned a metaphor that was similar to several others, in signifying organic regeneration: “A flowering tree dying and losing all its blooms and, all of a sudden, it comes back to life and blooms stronger than ever.”

Joe shared a metaphor that conveyed destruction, regeneration, and a fresh start:

> I guess a metaphor would be like, describing it as . . . like how a light beam turned on, or like an earthquake, or a bomb, or something. And emasculating the Earth. Ahm, so yeah, I guess I would describe it as some catastrophic event, you know? But, like a forest fire, where green grass has come back, and you’re getting new growth, and new life. . . . Something that always just kind of has to destroy the whole forest to get the new.

Claire’s metaphor was somewhat similar to Joe’s, in signifying destruction that allowed for free-flowing movement, as well as wellbeing. This metaphor picks up on the common theme woven throughout most of the interviewees’ narratives, of moving forward:

> If I’m going to go back to *that* metaphor of a river and a dam, Shadrach was that, you know, a catapult. I think of him as a catapult, like a big bolder, just *blasting* that dam, *boom*, and breaking it. *Blowing* it apart, you know, just . . . the dam is

> gone, and Shadrach is there, and now he's going to, you know, it's just going to flow, and, yeah, he was, that was definitely Shadrach. He didn't come in subtle at all [laugh].

Becky gave two metaphors. Her first one depicted expansion and new ways of seeing or awakening: "It's kind of like, ah, . . . walking along in the dark for a while, and then, a bolt of lightning, and you can see a whole other world to walk into." Her second metaphor conveyed the same qualities: "Being on a small island and realizing that, really, the island is connected to a whole universe." Earlier in our interview, Becky had consistently described her event as, "lightening flashes all around, upon climbing to the top of a mountain." Like Becky, Susan also expressed awakening with her metaphor:

> I'm happier than I've been in a long time. Ahm, I mean, I think, at the time, it was, it was sort of like, well, maybe like a light bulb that went on and, all of a sudden, it clicked into, "Hey, wow, you know what? I could retire. I could do this! I *could!*" It was like, "*Wow!*"

Glenn's metaphor was symbolic of the spiritual meaning he perceived with his event: "It was a message from God. It was an illustration of, ah, what God does for us in Jesus Christ. How his grace works in my life." He elaborated, "The meaning of the word "grace" is, ah, certainly a lot more significant to me now. . . . Definitely a *spiritual* experience." Earlier, Glenn had mentioned that his event was "just like the conversion of Paul, the Apostle, on the road to Damascus." The metaphor Anthony gave was duplicated by Christy in a discussion, and is one that reveals the cycles of feelings, emotions, and thoughts the practice of reflection creates:

> A rollercoaster. Ahm, . . . ultimate highs and ultimate lows, twists and turns, and backtracking, and, ah, . . . coming to an end but, then, feeling as if I wanted to get back on the ride. I think that, you know, dovetailing with being in school, and my career, and all the different things that I've been part of, I *have* been on a rollercoaster. It's been fun at times, and it's been scary at times, but I *love* rollercoasters. And I think I'm a type of person that can't have it any other way.

Karen was one who struggled with this question. She presented the expression, "Mother knows best?" She explained that, "We all remember my mom's saying, 'Go wash your face, and have a cup of tea.'" Her metaphor conveys a sense of wanting to move on in a positive direction toward wellbeing, and not to dwell on the painful past. Kevin too struggled with this assignment, but came up with a metaphor that depicted his event: "A perfect negative storm." Earlier, Kevin had described this:

> The image from the movie *Titanic* came to mind, where, you know, I could picture myself as Leo DiCaprio, stripping off the wooden pieces and going into the water, and then drifting away. I thought, "I can do that, or I can thrash around and fight like crazy," to do what I thought was the right thing. And, I made a decision in that run-up that I was not gonna do the Leo DiCaprio approach; I was going to paddle like crazy to do the right thing, 'cuz, I thought, even if the outcome is going to be the same, I would rather go out knowing that I had continued to do everything I could, to do my job well, rather than just, you know, slip into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

Maria's metaphors convey healing, regeneration, awakening, and hard self-work, as well as new knowledge:

> The idea of an infection or of breaking a bone, is a good one. Yeah, it was, ah, let's see,
>
> . . . because it had been a long time that it had been wronged. It had been broken, and it was set wrong. And then, it had to be re-broken, in order to reset correctly. And, ah, another one can be like the, ahm, you know, if you never use certain muscles, they atrophy, and you can't walk. You never would learn how to; you never get the opportunity to walk; those muscles wouldn't develop. So I had to be stiff on them. I had to start developing those muscles because there wasn't something that was in my realm of being to, ah, you know. . . . I, I hadn't explored that realm of pleasing myself; I was always pleasing somebody else.

Alice's metaphor of sea change lies behind what I chose to name my theory, after wrestling with several other conceptions: "What comes to my mind is metamorphosis." Later, she added one that emphasizes the process of self-work in reflective practice, "What I'm imagining right now is an onion. Peeling back the layers of an onion. I don't know why that comes to mind but, to get to the *core*." John's metaphor was very similar to Alice's: "A cocoon into a butterfly."

***Summary of Stage 10.*** I feel that my participants' metaphors dramatically depict the significance and the subjective meaning of these events to us, as well as what these individuals saw as the gifts their experiences gave to them. Specifically, the number of very similar, positive, and organically regenerative metaphors that convey new life, beauty, and strength is most interesting and telling, and depict awakening, growth, and/or wellbeing. They affirm a point I previously made: regeneration is more powerful than resilience, which is merely returning to what was. Indeed, many of the metaphors

illustrate profound change, and represent how the participants redefined their event itself, as well as their Selves, in reconstructing for the better after their "perfect storm." Like Alice and John's very words, this quality of regeneration indicates authentic "metamorphosis."

**Summary of S-RQ 1**

I can now summarize a response to the first subsidiary research question I proposed, which was: What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event? As depicted earlier in Table 4.2, the types of events the interviewees reported as sudden, life-changing experiences were both positive and negative, although more often negative, as 81.25% indicated. These events ranged from job loss, death of a family member or close friends, meeting their soon-to-be spouse, separating from their partner, their spouse leaving, grave illness, and other isolated events, such as showing off with a loaded gun or reading a groundbreaking research study. Every one of the participants said it was a profound, multi-faceted, and on-going learning event that greatly impacted their direction and quality of life thereafter. "I remember it vividly, like it was yesterday," as Glenn voiced.

Based on the interviewees' responses, I would say their learning process met, in some respects, Mezirow's ten-step criteria (2009) of a transformative learning event, which, for Mezirow, is more of a process than an actual event. In contrast with Mezirow's process, which begins with a "disorienting dilemma," each participant's sudden, life-altering event itself was a disorienting experience and a *catalyst* for a positive learning and change process that continues today. Other aspects of Mezirow's

ten stages differed in order and in content for my interviewees, as well. For example, critical reflection seemed to come before acceptance of their changed circumstances, or external acceptance. Moreover, the two types of reflection, critical and self, were distinct processes, and self-examination did not begin in full until acceptance of the Self first occurred. My participants' learning and change process appears thus far to be:

1. Sudden, life-altering event, either positive or negative (similar to Mezirow's Stage 1)
2. Shock, numb, or stunned state
3. Preliminary instinctive action for some to manage immediate constraints and barriers, which may be in conjunction with Step 2
4. Choice → assimilation and critical reflective practice (for some), which may include reconciliation of inner conflict with pre-event external behavior and lifestyle (similar to Mezirow's Stages 3 and 4) in construction of meaning
5. Acceptance of changed external circumstances → redefined reality
6. Acceptance of internal Self → "release" to move forward
7. Self-examination through reflective practice (similar to Mezirow's Stage 2), including thought, prayer, writing, journaling, meditation, and other methods, as well as more critical reflection as a learning tool → beginning of learning and growth, redefining authentic Self, perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities, etc. Note that this step is ongoing practice for many.
8. Considering opportunities, exploring options for new roles, relations, and action (Mezirow's Stage 5), and making decisions for action (similar to Mezirow's Stage

6) → may include creating or redefining a vision, life plan, and/or goals, as well as a change in time orientation. Note that this is a longer phase.

9. Moving forward → acquiring knowledge and/or skills through self-directed, discovery learning for best managing changed reality, and/or executing vision/plan/goals → redefinition (similar to Mezirow's Stage 7). Includes trying new roles (Mezirow's Stage 8), and may include realizing life purpose. Note that this step is ongoing practice for many.
10. Clarity → making more decisions for action
11. Moving forward to take action → metamorphic learning, expressing new or enhanced strengths, such as confidence (in part, similar to Mezirow's Stage 9)
12. Integration (similar to Mezirow's Stage 10) → self-actualization, and/or self-transcendence
13. Continuous learning and growth

Mezirow's (2009) conception of transformative learning prioritizes education, whereas I feel that the 13 steps I constructed from the interviewees' stories thus far better accommodates the learning and metamorphic change process that occurred after their sudden, life-altering events. Perhaps most important, this process was not linear but, rather, intertwined and cyclic, back and forth, in correlation with Anthony's metaphor of a "rollercoaster." It is also an ongoing process cycle that continues to this day for many of these individuals, years, even decades later. I do add to this process after discussing my remaining research questions.

Many of the metaphors my participants presented might be sufficient to address the second subsidiary research question I had, about whether or not adults who report

having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why. Nevertheless, I address this question in greater detail next.

## S-RQ 2: Do Adults Who Report a Sudden, Life-Altering Event Consider the Overall Learning Outcomes to be Negative or Positive, and Why?

One result from the data I collected is that the majority of the survey respondents (see Appendix G, Pilot Study Data Analysis) and interview sample (13 of the 16 interviewed) experienced what they perceived to be a negative sudden, life-altering event. I think most of us would concur that there are many positive events that have the potential to alter our perspectives and our lives. Because my sample sizes (197 survey respondents and 16 interviewees) are too small to generalize to a greater population, I can only surmise why more negative events were reported. Perhaps, positive events do not occur "suddenly" as often as some negative events do. Alternatively, negative experiences may have more of a *perceived* profound impact on our life stories. Because an explanation for this finding is not something I set out to examine in this study, I move on to address my second subsidiary research question, about whether or not adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider their overall learning outcomes to be positive or negative, and why.

### Negative Event with Positive Learning Outcomes

What I view as remarkable in my qualitative study results is that very few of the interviewees who experienced a negative event (13 out of 16, or 81.25%) expressed that they wished to return to life before their event, even in the face of life-threatening disease. "Gift" and "benefit" were words repeated in common, as in Jane saying, "My

cancer was a gift." Those few who did articulate wanting that return experienced the loss of a loved one, although they, too, were able to perceive positive learning outcomes from their negative event. This finding indicates an inordinate ability to accept, which I believe was a key precursor to my participants' shifting perceptions. Like Mezirow, I concur that changed perspectives is evidence of transformation, but I see this phenomenon as beginning earlier in the overall learning process than he does. To this end, I placed it in steps 5 and 6 of the learning process I constructed from my participants' narratives.

Specifically, my pilot study results showed that 40% of the 117 valid respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they felt, overall, that their life-changing event was a positive event, in that it resulted in positive, long-term outcomes (see Table G.2 in Appendix G), as compared to 9% of 115 respondents who felt, overall, that it had negative outcomes. Table 4.3 synthesizes the interviewees' transformed perceptions of their sudden, life-changing event, as reported years and decades later.

Table 4.3
*Interviewees' Perceptions of Sudden, Life-Altering Event*

| Participant | Sudden Event | At Time of Event | | At Time of Interview | | Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Positive | Negative | Positive | Negative | |
| Christy | Spouse left, drug addiction | | X | X | | √ |
| Henry | Life partner had affair, separation | | X | X | | √ |
| Becky | Met future husband | X | | X | | n/a |
| Kathy | Met future husband | X | | X | | n/a |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Karen | Death of parent | | X | X | X | √ |
| Anthony | Death of brother | | X | X | X | √ |
| Mark | Death of friends | | X | X | X | √ |
| Susan | Job loss | | X | X | | √ |
| Maria | Job loss | | X | X | | √ |
| Joe | Job loss | | X | X | | √ |
| Kevin | Job loss | | X | X | | √ |
| Alice | Groundbreaking research (Following Mother's mental illness) | X | | X | | n/a |
| Claire | Adopting very ill dog | | X | X | | √ |
| Jane | Breast cancer diagnosis | | X | X | | √ |
| John | AIDS diagnosis | | X | X | | √ |
| Glenn | Showing off with gun | | X | X | | √ |

**It takes time, but there *is* no going back.** Evidence of shifted perceptions weaves throughout the stories of my participants, as well as in the metaphors they gave to represent their event. For instance, Christy, while showing some attachment to her past, said she thinks of this event today as "a progression that ended up positive, for all":

> Honestly, I think that, . . . over the years, ahm, over the past decade, there have been times when I have thought, "Well, you know, it sure was, those were good times, they were fun times." And, yes, ah, yeah, you know, the temptation. There isn't a day that goes by, that I don't think about marijuana. There isn't a day that goes by, that I don't think about the times prior to my husband actually, you know, getting the look on his face and just leaving. . . . As far as ever wanting to go back to those times, nooooo. I would never want to go back. I lived those times already. And I know what they were and, yes, there were very good

> moments. . . . We try, we try to look at the good times that we did have. But, as far as going back to them, oh no, there *is* no going back to them. . . . There's a little bit of both in, in any kind of an event that changes one's life. We, we both look back on it with a sour taste in our mouths because we both know that it was very *hurtful* on *both* sides. . . . I'll tell you, it, that doesn't just happen. It takes time for both people to *get* that, and lots of talking, and lots of tears, and lots of anxieties, and lots of, ahm, backs and forths, and rollercoaster rides and, . . . but, we realize now that all of those things are positive, and that we want to experience the roller coaster ride together.

Karen's sudden loss of her mom was a negative event, but she acknowledges positive outcomes, such as wisdom:

> I don't think I'm better off. I don't think, I never, I guess I'm kind of pragmatic; I never feel like going back in time is good. I'd love to have my mom back but, ahm, I don't like the concept of going back in time. But then [sigh], you know, except for the, you know, some of the wisdom after the event.

Much like Karen, Anthony, who unexpectedly lost his brother, said with a sigh:

> If I could turn, go back in time to . . . do something for my brother, of course I would. . . . But I know that's not possible. And so, through this experience, just the fact that I'll *never* be able to bring my brother back, I guess I *do*, ahm, feel as if I, I don't want to have it any *different* from the experience that I went through, because, ah, it really *has* transformed me and turned me into a different type of person. . . . I think *anybody* would do anything to get a sibling or a relative back from a tragic loss like that. But, in terms of the experience and the journey, I

> don't think I would trade that for anything, because I . . . have really learned a lot about myself, and brought *our* family together, as well.

Mark was ambivalent about positive outcomes from the loss of close friends in an airplane crash: "I think I'm probably better off now. I think, ah, I mean, it's helped me grow to being compassionate, a little more, to show a little more emotion." He pointed out:

> Events like this affect you probably in some ways you don't even realize they did. And, ah, . . . I know I took chances. I know I, ah, . . . didn't expect to actually, . . . to live as long as I have. . . . So I was a little reckless, probably. Ahm, things I did, and a little reckless with my money, not saving enough.

Maria, calling it "synchronicity," said she was: "Much better off. It changed my life's course. And, ah, even though it hurt, it was a good thing, yes." Today, Susan thinks of her layoff as "a catalyst":

> That's probably something I never would have experienced if I was, ah, you know, still working, so. . . . I was so sick of the corporate. I don't think I'll ever go back to a big corporation. . . . I've decided [sigh], I don't care. Somebody can offer me a job at one of these big corporations for $100,000 a year right now, and I don't think I'd take it, 'cuz I, I *can't*; it was just *horrible*. I'm happier *now*, and that's *not* doing it, you know?

Joe, who was also laid off, spoke about how his outcomes have "gone to both extremes," and correlated his layoff with being a "catalyst," just as Susan did:

> I wouldn't want to return, now. I'm . . . better. Better, I mean, yes, in ways, and no, in other ways, you know? I think, it, it's, things have kind of gone to both

extremes. Like, the good things are really good, and the bad things are really bad. . . . Financially, I'm far from good, you know? It's kind of tough going from that middle class job where I'm making a decent salary to something that's sort of poverty. . . . Physically, I've been healthier when I was playing soccer but, really, like, for anyone my age, I'm doing really well in terms of health. I eat as good as I've ever eaten in my life. Ahm, I don't get sick. I feel like I have more control over my career, just because, like, I haven't managed to hold myself in to any specific career but, I've generalized and, and now, I can just kind of explore and do jobs that I find interesting, which isn't like, you know, at the end of each day, I feel like I've endured this massive kind of waste of all my time. . . . I think that's what I needed to kind of break out of that *mold* that I was fitting into. Ahm, I think others would just see it as like a freer spirit or a sense of, I don't know how you would put that, but like it, that they have the responsibility, the obligations to live up to, whether that's, you know, imposed by a person's parents, or friends, or society, or teachers, or whatever. Ahm, I was trying to fit a mold that wasn't me. . . . It was just, it was an income, you know? I used it to, it was just, you know, it was stress that I felt I could deal with, and, ahm, I mean, when I got to my 20s, it just kind of started hitting me: "I don't know if I really want to do this for another 30 years, just so I can retire with the fat retirement of some sort." Ahm, and I kinda just, well, just kind of reflecting on life and realizing that I really like doing physical work, and I like making things and producing things, and I like doing work that I feel is meaningful, and I was so unable to break that mold until the layoff happened. That was just the catalyst that *I* personally needed.

Henry was emphatic about being "*much* better off," and likened his change process to a "challenge":

> There are very few regrets I have. I have *some*, but that's not *one* of them. . . . Even to this day, I don't *blame* her, you know? I didn't take it personally. But, at the same time, it was *devastating* because it, what it did was send a confusing signal to *me*, a strong message that, "Well what kind of judgment do you have? You thought this was a lifetime partner." I was very committed to her. And I had *no* idea this would happen. I had full trust and faith in her. . . . I felt very secure with the relationship, and that's where the real mind fuck came around, and that's what I had to totally recreate, and that's what I had to *challenge* myself about. And then, restructure, and my guilt, and the lesson is, when I say, "I would rather take a risk to trust again, then to never trust *again*." I mean, what's the option? You, you just *don't* trust again? Or you take another risk? And the other thing is, "Ok, it happened before. My life is *still* good. It was a hard time. But I can get through it again." So is it worth the risk? Well, *yeah*. It's *worth* the risk. Did I learn some things as a result? Yeah, I like to think I learned a *lot* about who I am, and maybe relationships. . . . I grew. Definitely grew.

Like Henry, Kevin was unequivocal about the positive outcomes he realized, defining them as lessons in resilience and wisdom, and using the metaphor of "another gear," which parallels with the repeated construct of awakening:

> I'm really better off in every way, and it's one of those, "This was a very traumatic experience and time for me." As I look at it in the rearview mirror, it was critical to making me who I am, and actually created a much more, ah,

successful career, and much more *fulfilling* career, because the work I do today is much more interesting, because I pay attention to the people dynamic. And I did *not* before. . . . I still don't look back on what happened with any fondness because it was very painful. And I don't want to go through that pain again. I would not wish that pain on other people. But I see so much good that has come out of this, and, and I, I, I feel like, ahm, I *am* a much better person, much better husband, father, friend, mentor, businessman, and all of those things that, ahm, it's one of those things that I can look back and say, "I'm glad that happened. I didn't enjoy it, but it made me who I am today." . . . I think resilience is very important because, being someone who has mostly been successful, ahm, resilience is, "Ok, I am not successful, but that means I need to keep trying, and not do the same thing over and over again, but do different things, as well, and try different things." So resilience is one. Ahm, maturity, there's, I don't know if this is a category, but let me tell you what my learning was, and maybe you can help me categorize it. Ahm, I was raised in a very conservative, ah, religious home, and I'm a Christian, and I'm very, very proud of that. Ahm, I'm not as conservative as my parents are. And I was raised with the protestant work ethic, which says, if you keep your head down, if you work really hard, good things will happen to you. And, I thought that was my approach and, what I realized, when I was working as a management consultant—I was coaching teams, I was working with dysfunctional teams, I was running off-sites with people, so I was looking at my business as an outsider. And, what I realized was that I had missed the *people* side of the equation, and I had put so much effort into, ahm, doing my job well,

> that I had really forgotten that business is *really* about relationships and people. That's an important part, but the more important part is, how can you get people to work together better? And the ironic thing is that, ahm, I have natural gifts in this area, and I had never used those gifts explicitly, because I thought it was more important to, ah, keep my head down, work hard, do good work, and wait for someone to notice me. So, you know, when I had a chance to reenter the business in August 2001, I took this very important new learning and, to me, my time as a management consultant was an on-the-job MBA. . . . It was like another gear, I think, and it enabled me to shift my career development into overdrive. . . . I think the painful experience, ahm, opens us up more to learn positive lessons from life, than if we just do things right all the time. Because, if I do everything right all of the time, I believe in myself. If I don't do things right, or if I make mistakes, or if life is unfair to me, however you want to describe that, then I think more, I'm more *open* to thinking outside of myself.

Alice poignantly expressed how her sadness metamorphosed into wisdom and joy:

> So there's a part of me that is grateful for my experience, growing up with mental illness, but there's a part of me that does not want my kids to have to deal with that. . . . Oh *yeah*, I feel sad, but that's ok. That's ok. I think I've grown from the sadness, and have been able to turn it around to appreciating the value of the sadness. You know, I've got so many friends who, you know, they lead great lives, and they're happy, happy, happy, happy, ahm [laughter], and I think, "Oh, *bullshit!*" You know? There's something that sadness brings. Wisdom, maybe

> that's it. . . . And so I, I cherish the sadness and the way it has metamorphosized into joy. . . . I think, in my early years, she [mother] was such a role model for me. And then, I had to divorce from her, when she became mentally ill. And, ah, I had, maybe, disparaged that relationship with her. Ahm, and, ah, but I had beautiful memories of my mom as a young girl, you know? In my early years, age 2, age 3, age 4, and, when I hear people say they don't remember their early years, I feel so sad that they don't have beautiful memories of their moms. Because I do. . . . They gave me a sense of "someone" [laugh]. That may sound stupid, but anyway. . . . And I think that, in the long run, ahm, as I said before, made me the person I am today, going through all of this, and having some sense of what others go through. So, no, I really have no regrets. I mean, ahm, . . . it would have been nice to have had, you know [laugh], a happy, sweet little life but, ahm, but, the whole thing about, you know, dealing with [laugh], dealing with shit and becoming stronger. 'Scuse my language. *Yeah*. The whole sense of, of being, being part of the community, ahm, *empathetic* to others.

Today, Jane thinks of her "extraordinarily negative" event as a "gift": "The best thing that ever happened to me was that I thought I had cancer." She would not want to return to life before, even though she knows she has "an expiration date" now. Even with that, she said, "I love what I'm doing right now":

> It was an extraordinarily negative event that turned into just, something that looked and smelled so incredibly beautiful . . . [sigh, then silence]. I found, . . . you know what, you know what I found? I found that I liked myself. . . . Acceptance. *I like myself.* My, you know, family, ahm, ahm, says bad things. . . .

> And, it's so easy to believe the bad. It's never easy to believe the good. And, what the event did for me was that, I then believed the good, and did not believe the bad. And that was *huge*.

Likewise, in describing how he realized his life purpose from his event, Glenn said:

> I wouldn't want to return to the life I had before the experience, no. I think I'm so much better off now, in every way, in all areas of life. Everything that is life. Life before didn't have much direction and purpose. . . . I think about it in a positive way. . . . It's given me a good sense of wellbeing and, and made my life tremendously happy. I don't think there could be any kind of vocation or any situation that would make me more happy than what I've been, and what resulted from this experience.

**I've moved on.** John expressed some ambivalence over his event but, overall, considers it a positive event, referring to acceptance of a new path and of his Self, and to moving on:

> I am resigned that this is my health. *This* has happened to me. Or, I *allowed* this to happen to me. I've *accepted* it. Maybe not resigned, but *accepted* it. I could still be railing about, "This is unfair," you know? . . . I went through that for a short period of time. It's really not all that unfair, you know, in the big scheme of things. Ahm, so, in that way, I've accepted some, some would say resigned, . . . but I'm glad I'm on this path. Would I prefer not to have had to have this happen, to find that this is truly in my path, yes, oh *yeah*, but that's not what happened. So I have to make the best for myself. . . . I'm far, far, *far* better off. And, in a way,

> I *am* almost better off physical health-wise, because I've take more care of myself. I don't drink like I used to drink. I really wish I could quit smoking, and I've really cut down. I'm working on it. I don't take the risks I used to take. I sleep. I pay attention. I *realize* now the benefits of having a sleep *schedule*. I go to bed at the same time; I get up at the same time. It doesn't matter that it's the weekend; I still get up at 6:00. Because, I realized, morning is my best time. If I sleep until 11:00 on Saturday, that's time that's gone. So, yeah. . . . The medication I take, . . . having HIV is like being a diabetic. Diabetics shoot up in the side of the thigh every day for the rest of their lives, and that insulin prolongs their life. And, over the course of time, the insulin rejection does damage to your organs. The medication I take has prolonged my life. It keeps me very healthy. But over 10, 20, 30 years, we don't know, 'cuz we haven't known these drugs, or had these drugs for 10 years. It's going to, the toxicity will take its effect on my life. That's the tradeoff. Am I willing to make it? Oh, yes. Because I'm *happy* with myself where I am. . . . It's not my every thought anymore. It's like one of those things. It's like that bad marriage I had. I think about it. I learned from it. I've moved on. It happened; I can't deny it, but I don't dwell on it.

**Summary of S-RQ 2**

My participants' articulated feelings ranging from ambivalence to acceptance, and from sadness to unequivocal gratitude, for the learning outcomes from their sudden, life-altering events. Of great significance, all those who reported a negative event experienced a "shift" in perspective to view their event as either being, overall, a positive

life event at the time of our interview, or as a primary life event that had positive learning and growth outcomes. A statement of Kathy's summarizes my findings:

> Actually, when my mom died, I mean, it wasn't positive that she died, but the situation around it, and how she died, meeting her wishes, and how those of us in the family dealt with that, and afterwards, it was very good. So sometimes you can have good things in very terrible situations.

Indeed, in my participants' narratives, I found a consistent pattern, in that they were able to, pretty much on their own through the internal practice of reflection, construct the good out of the bad. Some embraced this meaning-making process relatively quickly after their sudden, life-changing event. For others, it took a longer journey. Nonetheless, the "shift" in perception began with acceptance of the event first and, then, of the Self. Several individuals repeated the same metaphoric word, "catalyst," in alluding to what they construed as the purpose or *meaning* of their sudden, life-altering event. This process of learning through redefinition and construction appears to be key to positive change in the face of adversity. Next, I examine my third subsidiary research question on the impacts of this type of learning event.

### S-RQ 3: The impacts of this Type of Adult Learning Event

The majority of the participants expressed that their lives were profoundly changed for the better because of their event. Indeed, I feel that the narrative examples I have given in this chapter establish without a doubt that the interviewees' sudden, life-altering events were significant or primary adult learning experiences in their lives. Likewise, I have already described many of the profound impacts of this type of learning event, such as a more present-focused time orientation, uncovering the authentic Self,

self-actualization through new career paths that are more "true" to inner values, and discovering life purpose in teaching and helping others. As a "catalyst" for learning and growth, I present what I perceive are other far-reaching impacts from this type of event.

**Learning as Healing and/or Wisdom**

All of the participants felt that the many "lessons" they learned from experiencing their sudden, life-changing events were healing to either the psyche or the physical body, or both, or represented aspects of wisdom. Some said their event had both impacts. Christy shared her poignant perspectives about how the learning process was healing for her and her husband's "wounds," associating "clarity" with wisdom:

> Well, it can be *very* healing, and has been. *Very* healing. And, yes, I think that I have, and my husband, both. . . . So, these, ah, issues or problems, ahm, these *wounds*, have been healed or continue to be in the process of healing. Ahm, I would also add to that, I think there is some wisdom there. I think that we have a lot to offer other people who might experience problems of a similar nature, especially relationships. Ahm, and I think that we speak from experience. I would also add though that, it's not just healing and wisdom that are products of something as life-changing as what we went through. . . . I think, in order to be wise, there needs to be clarity. Ahm, so, . . . and, in order to have clarity [laugh], one needs to be wise. . . . Being wise, for me, is having had enough experience, and having gone through . . . so many changes, ahm, cause and effect, and knowing certain outcomes are always going to be . . . the outcomes. And, being able to share that type of knowledge.

Karen felt that the learning from her event provided "wisdom, for sure." Similar to Christy, she said, "Healing is still happening." Henry felt that the learning from his event was both healing and wisdom about Self and others, which allowed him to move forward:

> I gained a lot. I learned a lot about *myself*. I learned about others. And I healed from it. So it's, oh, like, . . . when I said I figured out what I needed to do for myself to move forward, I really put that into practice.

Maria felt her event was "definitely" healing, and referred to her metaphor:

> It's kind of, like, when you have to break something open to release the infection, or reset a bone, kind of, you know, it's that. And then, ok, it, it's set better; it's now open, it's now in better condition than if it wouldn't have been exposed or released.

Maria feels she is wiser and of more value now, in that her behavior reflects her true priorities: "I believe wisdom is being able to make wise choices. It's a behavior and, so, yes, because my behavior is something that has more . . . value. It's a person's true value." Becky felt her event was healing. Joe too felt that the learning from his event was "definitely" healing for both his physical and mental health:

> The healing part was just mentally, like, I wasn't stressed out, I lost a lot of weight, ahm, when I come home at the end of the day, I'm generally content with what I did, you know, between that moment and waking up.

Later in our interview, Joe explained that his event's journey imparted wisdom, as well, as far as having a greater perspective: "I feel like I'm a much more well-rounded person, now that I've been a business owner, I've been an engineer, I've been a farmer.

You know, just kind of seen life from a lot of different viewpoints." Anthony felt he became wiser about emotion, feelings, and the "wellbeing of others":

> I definitely *did* get some wisdom through this because I learned a lot about . . . human emotion, and, ah, feelings, and, ah, . . . the wellbeing of different folks. And I think I have a different perspective on this sort of stuff, that not a lot of people have, who have ever lost a sibling like this, when we're so young, and our lives are ahead of us. I feel as if I *want* to help other people that are in the same situation, so that they can get perspective from somebody else that had the experience of that type of loss. And, ahm, make do with moving forward and trying to continue with your lives, and realize that there's other people you need to, ah, do the right thing for, so that they can heal, as well.

Much like Anthony, Kevin felt his learning involved healing through closure, as well as self-wisdom and "human" wisdom, which he now applies to his work and in counseling others:

> My level of self-awareness, and level of knowledge about business and the ability to impart that knowledge and experience to others, ahm, you know, which I would say is the wisdom part, both of those have dramatically happened. And, I think, in terms of the *human* part, I think what's nice about my experience is that I can actually encourage people who are going through difficult times, because what happened to me is in the back of this experience. And this was actually true, even in just a very short time after the company had hired me and my whole experience was sort of *behind* me. Ahm, it's a unique opportunity to see something that was *bad*, by any definition you might come up with, and see, in my view, how God

> turned that for good, and that is an encouragement. And so, that's the healing part, because healing does require some sort of closure, ahm, for most of us; closure means you've moved past the pain of that particular incident.

Referencing wisdom, awareness, and healing that "empowered" a path to becoming a better person, Claire said she feels:

> Wiser and much more tuned in to what's going on *worldwide*. And *that's* interesting . . . *absolutely* healing. Ahm, because it was *empowering*. But also, just healing, because I have to look at myself, and want to change myself. I want to be a better person, and I really feel that my dog *made* me a better person. He helped me to *want* to be a better person. Ahm, and yes, definitely, healing, in the sense that I was able to get back my dream and to move forward, and to heal physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, and I think that's still an ongoing journey for me? But, it was, definitely, ahm, my dog that catapulted that whole, ah, movement forward, and away from, you know, where I felt like I was just disappearing into a nothing in life.

Relating wisdom with the grief process, we see in Mark's poignant narrative that healing can be life long:

> I think wiser. . . . And, ah, . . . it just helped me learn to, to deal with, ahm, my emotions better than, ah, probably I did when I was young. . . . I think it's both. Ahm, the day after the crash, I went down to the university, actually went to the crash site. And, two years ago, I went back. Kinda retraced my steps. That's when I met the assistant coach. So that, but I think that was, that was like a good healing process. And then, the writing. Writing about, ahm, the crash and the trip

> there, you know, the day after. Ah, then, there's something in between, and then the trip back, and the meeting and all that kind of stuff. I think that was more of a healing. . . . I mean, the whole process of, ah, 43 years of dealing with it, but I think that the wisdom comes with realizing how that process works, and that it usually works that way for everybody. . . . I think everybody goes through the same process of grief. . . . I don't think that you ever heal completely.

**Healing is a long progression.** Alice associated her healing with strength, contentment, and a more authentic Self, but she was reluctant to quantify her event as one that brought her wisdom:

> All those other events made me stronger and stronger and, I think, more and more authentic. . . . Healing, for sure. I don't know, . . . to call it wisdom? I don't know. I think healing is better. It's closer, is what I'm saying. Yeah, I got in touch with a part of myself that I had really tried to keep stuffed inside of myself. You know, it was that whole thing, it was sort of like, ah, a progression. Remember when I told you that I had this sensation that my face was going to crack? Ahm, so, I think . . . *that* was the healing part of it. I got in touch with the part of, with what my dad had given me. In terms of, of gifts. . . . That I was ok. So it's been a long process, it really has. It has been a *very* long process, and there are these little turning points along the way, but I feel like I have come to a place where I am very content.

Like many of the other participants, Alice prioritized having an impact on others by sharing her new knowledge in gratitude:

> The article opened up a whole new world for me in terms of wanting to learn more about mental illness and taking a very active role in helping others learn more, as well. I, . . . what's given me a lot of satisfaction is seeing the younger people in my profession blossom. And, of course, it's always nice when they come to me and say things like, "Thank you for all you have done; thank you for all you do." Ahm, so, it's . . . [sigh], I guess I was just doing what I thought needed to be done. . . . I don't know, is that wisdom? I don't know. Maybe, but it, but, maybe it's just . . . [sigh]. I don't know. What is wisdom anyway? I think it's just living, living a life in the best way that one can. And, knowing, or realizing, the impact of my life on other lives. And, *really* being very grateful that I've had those experiences, and have *had* an impact.

Initially, Jane would not acknowledge either healing or wisdom: "No, it's simply learning. There's no healing involved." Later, she correlated redefinitions she constructed with self-wisdom:

> It was definitely a change, well, you know, well, my definition of success changed. My definition of failure changed. Ahm, . . . definitely wiser. . . . I'm more self-aware. . . . My definition of happiness has changed. I, ah, instead of external pleasures, I actually enjoy internal pleasures now. . . . You cannot help but gain wisdom. Ahm, when you go through, you know, "You're going to be dead" [laugh]. "You're going to die." So, you gain that type of wisdom that things are different. That ah, . . . you, . . . you view your learning differently. It takes on a different complexion. There's no longer black and white. . . . Being

right is no longer important. It's no longer *as* important. I used to have to *always* be right.

Healing and wisdom paralleled with spirituality for Glenn:

I guess I realized that my life was sort of incomplete before, and I guess it was a healing experience and, ah, I needed to redirect my life so things were going in the right direction. So, in a sense, I felt that things were out of order and I needed to change my priorities. . . . It gave me wisdom, about the essence of Christianity. Of what God did in Jesus Christ. He, he sent his son into the world to, to save us, and to establish a relationship with us. And that's made possible through Jesus Christ, and it comes by faith in Christ as a free gift. Just like he gave me my life as a free gift. Because I didn't *deserve* to live. What I did should have led to my death. But it didn't. Because God definitely intervened in the situation and *saved* me. And that was a gift of my life as a *free* gift. So, I want to spend the rest of my life expressing my gratitude for that. . . . I consider it more wisdom than, than healing. I guess you could describe it as healing but, to me, it's a matter of wisdom. . . . It was a parallel of what happens spiritually.

John viewed his learning as experience that imparted wisdom:

I was 40, and I thought I was gonna die. So my shift was very different. I started working on things that some people don't start working on until they retire in their 60s, because my time could be much shorter. So that, . . . I don't think it's changed my path; it just made me more diligent about everything. I have let go of those silly society trappings that keep you occupied from working on who you really want to become.

Kathy perceived her positive event as healing at the time, and felt that her subsequent learning experience provided wisdom over time:

> I was *really* lonely. And, you know, frankly, wondered what I was going to do. Specifically, I was in the process of getting a job in [State]. In fact, I was in the last stages of negotiating salary at that point. And, if I would have met him [soon-to-be-husband] like a month later, I would have been gone. So, ahm, and, so, that did totally change my direction. . . . I think I was more, ah, relaxed and, ahm, able to process maybe information a little bit better, so I guess wisdom, you know? Over time, I mean. We've been married 41 years. You know, you've gotta learn something about other people and yourself, and the world, your view—I guess that would be wisdom.

**Benefits as Impacts**

The benefits of healing and self-wisdom were two primary impacts of the learning process the interviewees went through after their events, but there were many other positive benefits, as well. These include the constructs of self-actualization and/or self-transcendence (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943), which I previously discussed with my first subsidiary research question, under Mezirow's (2009) Stage 8. Essentially, my participants affirmed that, with their changed needs now being driven by these two upper motivational levels, wellbeing and quality of life are enhanced, with positive impacts extending out to many others. I included these two benefits in Step 12 of the learning and change process I constructed to summarize my first subsidiary research question.

Still other beneficial qualities that the interviewees realized and mentioned throughout their stories carry a host of labels, including inner growth, spirituality,

simplicity, present-moment focus, gratitude, strength and courage, confidence, success in vocation and more meaningful work, awakening to learning and greater awareness, enhanced wellbeing, happiness and joy, and what they considered "becoming" a "better," more "authentic" Self.

**Positive Impacts on Others**

The positive impacts this event had on others that were cited by my participants are far reaching, to encompass family, work, the community, society in general, and the environment. Jane stated that, "There was definitely a shift in the perception of myself, and my place. Not only with my friends, but in the community, in my country, and in the universe." Christy correlated a falling dominoes metaphor with a "dynamic" group change within her family:

> What's been *wonderful* to watch and *see,* is how my mother and father *and* my husband have changed also. . . . I think that *they've* gone through some self-identity changes, *too*. Ahm, because of *my* changes; I think that these changes come to people and, it's like *dominoes*. Ah, you know, you push a domino and the dominoes fall, and it's not just one person going through a change. The closeness between my parents and myself and, of course, my husband and myself, and my husband and my parents, it's been a *dynamic* change. It's been a *group* change.

**Life-Altering Events Inform other Learning in Life**

Another impact that emerged from the data is that the participants felt their learning experience informed other, subsequent learning in their lives. This finding makes sense, in that all of these individuals were empowered by the changes their

sudden, life-altering events brought to seek formal and informal education, training, and other types of information through a self-directed, discovery learning process. However, I observed in several of the participants that their learning process extended beyond seeking knowledge at the time about how to best manage their life changes, to "snowball" into embracing a new life value of "continuous" learning and change. This finding may correlate with the higher education I previously noted in the interview sample. For instance, Henry realized that his event added to his work and to his life:

> That's what [my mentor] told me. He said, "You know, this just makes your work that much richer." . . . This experience made my life a lot richer, just like it made my study a lot richer. Or the understanding of the work that I did, subsequently.

Joe stated, "I think, it was a big lesson that I came away with, you know? And I think, from that lesson, I've been able to continue learning in a direction I took from that moment." Similarly, Claire voiced that, "In fact, learning has been, like I said, *ongoing*, rather than a destination where I've arrived; it's an ongoing challenge to continue. And so, I would say the learning just can *compound*."

**Invaluable learning experience.** I queried my interviewees about how their learning from this event compared with the formal education they have received, but did not get much data in this regard. Most said that the two types of learning are too different, and cannot be compared. Thus, it is unknown whether or not these individuals prioritized one or the other types of learning. What is known, however, is that they perceived the learning from their sudden, life-altering event as "invaluable," as evidenced by this common theme many voiced. For example, Susan said, "To *me*, I think *this* type of life experience, it really, ahm [sigh], I think it really shows you . . . how *well* you

handle life, how well you can handle, ah, . . . all the different aspects of life, the bad and the good, whatever is thrown at you, you know?" Similarly, Maria articulated,

> It's something for myself. It was very valuable. . . . It wasn't like, I mean, I think I could have been in higher education, I could have multiple degrees, and not learn what I learned that day. What I came away with was, ahm, a change in my heart. And, some people, *yeah*, they can get that from going through the process, you know, and I probably have too, in a lot of ways. . . . For me, it was, ah, it was a very different learning experience. And then, you have those people that never have gone past the 7th grade, and they're very wise, you know? They've learned from their experiences, too.

Likewise, Henry reflected,

> Even to this *day*, I mean, what I learned, ah, is *invaluable*, which is basically that saying, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger?" There's a lot of *value* in that. I *did* live through it. I *am* stronger. Great things *did* happen to me, despite all that, even in a time where I was relatively *weakened*. Ahm, and I was still able to *manage*, ahm, I was able to manage a pretty intensive study with very high-performing professionals and, ahm, start a business, pick myself up. I mean, there are a lot of things that went along with that, that really shored me up, and demonstrated that I had some *character* that wasn't completely destroyed. . . . These are the benefits of an *experience* like that.

**Summary of S-RQ 3**

There are many possible reactions when faced with a sudden, life-altering event, and these include denial, disassociation, escape, or avoidance (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; K.

McLaren, 2010). Such reactions can manifest as depression, addiction, risky behaviors, anger, posttraumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD), and other afflictions. In examining the narratives of my participants, it is clear that they chose instead to journey within and directly confront their changed situations through the process of reflection. That self-directed, discovery learning process itself had many far-reaching impacts. Some of those impacts I covered elsewhere are a more present-focused time orientation and new career paths, which include mentoring and teaching roles that positively impact others, as well as greater society, itself. As a benefit of redefining their Selves and their lives, and in sharing their experiences with others, these individuals are thus able to express many of the character strengths they constructed out of the learning process in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering events, such as wisdom itself, along with those that fall within the other five categories of courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Anonymous, 2011a; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011). The field of positive psychology maintains that building and expressing our strengths enhances meaning, authenticity, and quality of life (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, 2011).

Note that, once again, we saw the common theme of moving forward in my participants' narratives, which has been a thread woven throughout from early on, and which we can now associate with healing. From these narratives, I grasped a better understanding of the construct of healing, in that there are two aspects to it: (a) healing from the event itself, which applies to those who experienced an event they perceived as negative, and (b) healing from life prior to the event. Both aspects of healing served as acceptance and closure for my participants, on all the physical, cognitive, and spiritual

levels. In coming to closure, these individuals were then empowered to perceive lifelong benefits such as strength, gratitude, a simpler, less stressful life, careers that aligned with their hearts, redefined notions of success, joy and happiness, and overall greater wellbeing. Researchers Lechner, Tennen, and Affleck, (2009) too found this correlation between benefit-finding and growth.

Additionally, the learning and change process my participants went through positively informed subsequent learning events they experienced in life. In fact, growth in the form of awakening to wisdom, especially self-wisdom and feelings of becoming a "better," more "authentic" Self, was a significant resulting effect. What is of most import is that all of the impacts were considered *positive*. I arrive at the point where I can now respond to my overarching research question (O-RQ) on the learning process for a sudden, life-altering event.

**O-RQ: What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event?**

One of the central tenets of Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 2009) is that this type of adult learning evolves over time. His premise was substantiated by my interviewees, many of whom also expressed that their learning remains ongoing. In part, this responds to the overarching research question I proposed: What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event? There is more to it, however.

**A Complex, Multi-Faceted, and Ongoing Learning Process**

Beyond being evolving and ongoing, the learning process for my participants was not always a forward movement, nor was it simple. For some, the process brought

further pain, distress, and suffering, beyond the event itself. In other words, it was not a linear, step-by-step, continuous progression, which is exactly why we repeatedly heard the motivational forward-movement "mantra," per se. For instance, Kevin shared a particularly emotional moment of suffering:

> There was one day in particular where I was sitting in my chair, ah, actually crying, because I had no idea what I could *do* to get a job. And I remember, even at that time, I had this thought that I never wanted to lose the memory of the pain of that experience because, as someone who has mostly got it right, and mostly been very successful, I think it's very easy in situations to think, "Oh gosh, well, this is my *right*. I got this because I'm really good at what I *do*. And those who don't get this don't think the same things because they're *not* good at what they do." And I'm not saying I thought in quite that black and white of terms. . . . I did think, "You know what? This pain, here I am sitting at the lowest of the low. I don't want to forget that, because I want to *give*, if I have success again; I want to have that success with greater humility." So I learned a great lesson in humility.

Similarly, Jane spoke about the length of time her learning process has taken and why: "Just because, well, I'm sorry, depression hit. And I didn't know it at the time. Nobody talks to you, . . . and this was like after two years. And, just being in pain." She also mentioned realizing several years later that she had been experiencing PTSD.

All of the participants voiced that the learning from their events continues to this day, years, even decades, later. Not realizing the importance of the lessons this event

brought until later, Kevin expressed his learning process as one of "incremental improvements":

> I remember, one of the thoughts that I had early on, ahm, you know, as, as a person will say, ah, I remember, one of the things that I did take comfort in was an assurance that God had plans for me and, so, my changing condition did not affect my value in God. Actually, I guess my theoretical knowledge was put to the test in that. I would say most of the learning was gradual. But there was that immediate, you know, "Oh, this is bad." And then, "Ok, you say you believe certain things. Here's your chance to prove it." . . . So, I would say it evolved over time. Ahm, and, and maybe that's because I'm a thick person. I, I needed to, ah, the main learning that had a profound effect on me, ahm, required that I experience my professional life in a different way. Ah, *before* the lessons fully sank in. And some of the lessons that I saw, ahm, actually, I *realized*, I did not realize at the time the *importance* of the lesson that I was learning, so, yeah, I would say I learned over time.

Claire explained that her learning process was both an immediate and an ongoing, multi-faced, evolutionary process, and spoke about learning as a choice:

> Kind of multi-faceted, simply because, the day we got Shadrach, I, I was *horrified* to see what he *looked* like. The dog was a mess. And my heart was just shattered to see him. My thoughts at the time were, "'I'm bringing this thing into my life. Man, how am I going to deal with this?" So, *that* was life changing for me, because I was going to have to help somebody else who was broken just like me. And, how was I going to fix him, if I'm still broken? . . . *That* was immediate,

> where I had to start to really think, "How was I going to help him?" *But*, where I'm at now and everything, and what I'm talking with you about today, that was a time evolution process, and it's still an ongoing process. I honestly don't think that that process is going to end in my life. It will just end when I end [laugh] . . . because I *choose* for that to be; I don't *choose* to stay. And, I have family members who've just *stopped*. . . . I was the typical person sitting and watching TV at night, and letting that mainstream media affect my mind [laugh], you know, and not reading all the time, and learning, and getting to reach out to others and, you know, I was married to myself, until Shadrach.

Mark spoke in terms of acceptance, rather than learning: "I think basically it was a slow process. . . . Probably accepting what happened. . . . I'd say, many, many years. Ah, I would probably say not until 2006, when the movie came out, . . . so, it's like 36 years." Jane used a dramatic metaphor to contrast immediate change with longer-term, ever-evolving learning:

> The changes were just immediate, yeah. *Yeah*. And the learning took me a very long time. I'm a very slow learner. . . . But everything was different the next day. . . . There, there was no earth underneath my feet. It was just *that* earthshattering, absolutely. But then, you know, it took a long time. Months. Years. . . . Some of it was absolutely immediate, absolutely, within months. And some of it, it just takes time. For me, it's ah ever evolving, you know? This morning, the sky was absolutely stunning. That, to me is a success.

Anthony said he was still learning and still healing, and that he did not think he would ever completely heal:

> I remember, the first month that he [brother] was gone, I was kind of numb to everything. I [throat clearing] was trying to be strong for my family and, ah, and, and, really didn't, I think, let it show, but, ah. That first month, in terms of how it impacted me, I really just felt as if I became, *had* to become the, the *man*, had to become the *adult* for my entire family, because I am the oldest son and, so, I think that it really just, ah, solidified my standing in my family, and people depended on me to help them get through the *really* tough time. And so, *that* was the immediate thing that happened and, I think, over time, what happened was that I slowly kind of had to start looking at myself, and to make sure that I was looking out for *my* own wellbeing and happiness, and I think *that* was an emergent thing from this event. Ah, it . . . really showed me that I have to, like I said, not take things so serious sometimes, and to stop and smell the roses, and really value the little things—that I get the opportunities to be with my mom and dad, and do little, simple things that I'll remember for the rest of my life. So, it was, it's definitely *been* an emerging thing, and I'm *still* learning from it and, and healing from the loss of my brother but, it was somewhat a combination of a sudden impact and, then, a slow, ah, transition to time and all of the weeks and months and seasons that pass by. Every day is different but, I think, slowly but surely, I am healing as best I can, even though I don't think I'll completely heal from it.

As opposed to the months and years of learning that were expressed by some, Glenn stated that his learning "evolved over a period of time. Maybe weeks." He elaborated,

> I'd say it was a matter of a couple of weeks that I discovered the *meaning* of the experience and, then, of course, I pointed in that direction and started going into studies toward that goal. And, eventually, made the decision to go into the ministry as, ah, as my life career. To be a missionary.

**Sudden Change, Sudden Realization**

In my prior observations of individuals who had experienced these types of sudden, life-altering events, they seemed to make significant paradigm shifts and take substantive action to move forward relatively quickly. These observations informed the central purpose of this study, which was to explore what these individuals learn and how, in the aftermath of such an event. Just as with my earlier observations, my interviewees reported shifts in perspectives and made behavioral changes within short periods of time to manage their altered life situations. I incorporated this phenomenon in the learning and change process I constructed to summarize my first subsidiary research question, and noted then that I see the perspective shifts earlier in the learning process than Mezirow (2009) did.

As I was conducting interviews, I came to understand that there was much more to my participants' overall learning and change process, and that it *was* indeed "complex and multi-faceted," as Claire mentioned. She and others expressed that it was also ever evolving and ongoing. Moreover, about midway through my interviews, I serendipitously heard a clear pattern emerge, in that my participants were reporting an immediate realization or insight, some used the word "epiphany," which occurred immediately or shortly after their events. At that point, I returned to the interviews I had already transcribed and analyzed at a top level and, sure enough, uncovered that finding

"nugget" hiding in those earlier narratives. From then on, I theoretically probed for this phenomenon. Three of the 16 participants denied having a sudden realization, but I affirmed that it had indeed occurred in all but one instance. Unfortunately, I was unable to contact this particular participant for follow up. Christy specifically referred to two sudden realizations as "catalysts" for her learning and change process:

> I believe that nothing is really, ah, like a lightning strike. I believe that there are chains of cause that might lead to an ultimate change and, so, in this case, for me, what I felt like was sudden was my husband's absolute determination, that "That's it." Ahm, you know, when I said, "I want a divorce" that morning, ahm, "I've *had* it; we can't get along anymore," his usual reaction was just, he'd just end up shutting down, but was, ahm, ahm, ah, ah, . . . never *leaving, never* absolutely, physically *leaving*! And, so, *that* was a sudden event. Ahm, one that had never occurred before. . . . I suddenly *learned* that my husband was very much ready to move on. . . . Part of the catalyst was realizing, and this is before any kind of psychological counseling took place, ah, I think the *catalyst* was, "You know, Christy, you have, *all* of your life, listened and followed, for the most part, your parents' advice." I decided at that point in time, it was time to *cut*, ah, the invisible umbilical cord, and make my own decision based on what my feelings, my, my best feeling in my *heart* was, which was that my husband and I *need* to be together; we love each other, and we can work things out.

Henry, displayed safety needs with his sudden realization immediately after learning about his life partner's affair, before his period of shock: "I can't stay here.

What do I do now?" He stated that he "had a lot of sudden realizations," but the second one he cited was remarkably similar to Christy's:

> Like the incident I told you, where my mother said, "Oh, if you want her, you need to *fight* for her." Well, one realization was, "No, that's *bullshit*. That's not necessarily true. That doesn't mean *anything*." What I, my actions said to *her*, my ex, is that it was disrespectful. That's the message I gave *her*, and that's exactly the *opposite* of what I was trying to do. So, I said, "Alright, I'm just going to follow my heart. I don't care what anybody else says. Nobody knows the situation." It was kind of like, "Just listen to what's going on in the moment, and move through *each* moment, each day, each *incidence* of whatever happens, and, ahm, and build from *there*." Ah, while at the same time, these things add up to, ahm, a longer-term learning process.

Claire described a sudden realization that was negative, and a second, more positive one that was more of a decision:

> My husband was adamant that we were going to keep this dog, no matter what I was feeling. And, between him and my friend, you know, and this is only in one day. Okay, we had, we got him on the 18th of December and, on the 19th, I was thinking, "What did I do?" And my friend shook me up that same night. And by the following morning, ah, Monday morning, I woke up, . . . I woke up and said, "I'm running with this. This is it." And I never looked back from that decision, regardless.

Mark's sudden realization came shortly after learning about the loss of the Marshall team and his best friend: "Immediate was, I realized that we weren't as, ah,

*invincible* as we *thought* we were. . . . We were . . . both athletes, all everything, you know? All county, all state, all whatever and, you know, we had the attitude that, "We're invincible. Nobody could touch us." Alice, who reported having more than one sudden, life-changing event, described several sudden "epiphanies," including: "*He* was not the one that was, ahm, the reason for her illness." When she attended her first NAMI event after reading the Amish study, "Ohhhh [shaky, emotional voice]. I'm feeling teary now, but, . . . but, it was a feeling, 'This is a *home*. This is a place where I can *talk* about my private hell.'" With her first event, when she threw a chair at her father and then grabbed a knife in self-defense, Alice realized: "I can't say it was defeat. I think it was like, 'Ok, we're equals.' You know? Ahm, 'You have had power over my life; well now, I have some power.' So, I think, in *that* moment, I grew up, a *lot*."

Interestingly, Jane's sudden realization was the inverse of Kevin's, and came shortly after her "huge shock" of a cancer diagnosis: "I had to pull over, on the side of the road 'cuz I was driving, because I broke down, and I was shaking uncontrollably. And then, something hit me, and I said, "Oh, it's not that bad. It just isn't that bad." Glenn had a very emotional sudden realization before a period of shock:

> My immediate reaction was to realize that God had saved my life. What I did should have resulted in my death. God had given me a second chance at life. I was overwhelmed by the emotional impact to the point I could barely remain conscious."

Maria had a sudden learning insight:

> Right then and there, I said, you know, "I'm going to switch *my* life so that I am not going to be centered out from my home. I'm going to be centered inside

> myself; inside my home, and I don't really care if I climb a ladder; I don't care if I make $42,000 a year. I want to make enough to live the life that I want to live. . . . And that's what was going to be important.

Several participants, and particularly those who experienced a positive, sudden life-altering event had more of a sense of an intuitive feeling or "knowing," which was not abstracted into thought, either then or now. Kathy experienced this "knowing" soon after meeting her future husband: "This was not a lightening bolt. Ahm, I think it was just a feeling of elation, and the realization that this was somebody I could spend my life with and be very happy, and make them happy." Becky also voiced a "knowing," which came soon after being stunned about meeting her future life partner who just "fit":

> Well, I think, what I was just saying about what I would *do* with my life, I think there was a, ah, just that "fitting;" I suddenly *knew*, you know, when [my future husband] said, "Well, why don't you go back to school and finish your English degree." So, it was just a clicking into place of, of what I *needed*. Before, I was just kind of freefalling; not really knowing *what* I was going to do. And, so, I guess the epiphany was this, "Ok, this is my past now. Now, I know what I'm doing.

Table 4.4 is a synopsis of the interviewees' sudden realizations, epiphanies, and intuitive "knowings."

Table 4.4
*Interviewees' Sudden Realizations, Epiphanies, and "Knowings"*

| Participant | Sudden, Life-Altering Event | Sudden Realization/Epiphany/"Knowing" |
|---|---|---|
| Christy | Spouse left, drug addiction | 1. "My husband was very much ready to move on."<br>2. "I've got to get rid of this stuff, whatever it is, that is interfering with my ability to think straight."<br>3. "You have, all of your life, listened and followed, for the most part, your parents' advice." |
| Henry | Life partner had affair, separation | 1. "I can't stay here. What do I do now?"<br>2. "Alright, I'm just going to follow my heart. I don't care what anybody else says. Nobody knows the situation." (similar to Christy's) |
| Becky | Met future husband | 1. A "knowing" that everything "fit"<br>2. "Now, I know what I'm doing." |
| Kathy | Met future husband | 1. Feeling of elation<br>2. "This is somebody I can spend my life with and be very happy, and make them happy." |
| Karen | Death of parent | 1. "This can't be real." [denial]<br>2. Realizing how important her mother was in her life. |
| Anthony | Death of brother | "I have a duty to become 'the man,' the adult, for my entire family, so that they can heal." |
| Mark | Death of friends | "We aren't as invincible as we thought we were." |
| Susan | Job loss | "I want to do this. I just really got to do this!" |
| Maria | Job loss | "I'm going to switch my life so that I am not going to be centered out from my home. I'm going to be centered inside myself; inside my home." |
| Joe | Job loss | Unknown |
| Kevin | Job loss | 1. "Oh, this is bad." |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | 2. "Ok, you say you believe certain things. Here's your chance to prove it." |
| Alice | Groundbreaking research (following Mother's mental illness) | "He was not the one that was the reason for her illness."<br>Earlier event: "You have had power over my life; well now, I have some power."<br>NAMI: A feeling that "This is a *home*." |
| Claire | Adopting very ill dog | 1. "What did I do? How am I going to deal with this? How am I going to fix him, if I'm still broken?"<br>2. "I'm running with this. This is it." |
| Jane | Breast cancer diagnosis | "Oh, it's not that bad. It just isn't that bad." |
| John | AIDS diagnosis | 1. Intuitive feeling: it just "wasn't his time."<br>2. "Look at where you are in life. You may not have another 40 years to get where you want to go." |
| Glenn | Showing off with loaded gun | "God has saved my life. God has given me a second chance." |

For the majority of the participants, their sudden realization came soon after the event itself. As a few reported it, this phenomenon occurred before or even during their period of shock, numbness, or being stunned. A few had more than one sudden realization, including one before and one after the shock period. In coding my participants' words and, through the process of induction, I concluded that their individual epiphanies or sudden realizations and "knowings" appeared to serve as an impetus for moving forward to begin a longer-term learning and change process, much like Christy articulated. In fact, these epiphanies seemingly acted as "drivers" or "guides," in that they correlated with the direction of the participants' reflective content. The second realization seemed to be more of a decision for some, whereas the first was

often a reaction. I do not discount that the secondary epiphanies represent some profound lessons the participants realized out of their events, and they did serve to guide their subsequent learning and change process. In analyzing this phenomenon, I came to believe, however, that the initial sudden realization may have been the primary impetus for the learning and change process that followed, rather than the actual event itself. I did not theoretically probe for secondary realizations.

In examining the individual realizations further, some seem to be an abrupt "knowing," as in a sudden type of wisdom. Some of the realizations were self-affirming, others signify strength and/or motivation or inspiration, two indicated "chance," as in opportunity, two were questions about the uncertain future needing resolution, and one I construe as a denial. This particular individual is a participant who I felt did not entirely meet my study selection criteria, in that she experienced a sudden, life-altering event, but did not shortly thereafter make a paradigm shift or take immediate, substantive action for change, other than what was necessary to do at the time. She also expressed that her healing is ongoing. Of note, it did seem that two of the three participants who experienced the death of a loved one took longer to assimilate and learn from their event, although there are indications of parallels with the five-stage grief process (Kübler-Ross, 1969) in other participants who experienced a different type of negative event, including Jane and John. These stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kauffman (2002) discusses the emerging mental health field of traumatology where the focus is on theoretical practice applied to grieving, and connects a loss of innate assumptions, which he calls our "assumptive world," therein extending the work of Janoff-Bulman (1992).

Other than the one sudden realization that is a denial, I perceive these epiphanies as representing messages or lessons of import that came first in my participants' overall learning process. Some express a commitment or need to change, which I view as an important difference with transformative learning theory. Specifically, transformative learning is premised on preparing to make significant change at the *end* of the process stages. Many of my participants initiated immediate changes that evolved and solidified "incrementally," as they moved through their subsequent learning process. In fact, the learning and change process appears to have been a choice, subconscious or not, influenced by one or more sudden realizations or feelings, which acted as the impetus in making that choice, and as a guide, in directing the next steps in the learning process. I believe this phenomenon is an important finding from my exploratory study. Indeed, it is always a choice, really, to deny, avoid, disassociate, escape, or confront an issue. Thus, these sudden realizations represent that choice.

The length of time to actualize a movement forward varied for my participants, but was fairly soon after their event for many of them (as in minutes, days, or weeks), especially for those with realizations that were optimistic or encouraging, self-affirming, and/or perceived as motivating, such as Glenn's and Maria's. Other examples of the participants making substantive paradigm shifts and behavior changes immediately or shortly after their event are Anthony assuming the head role for this family, Henry moving out of his home, Christy quitting marijuana, and Maria making a home out of her house and enrolling in school.

**Summary of Overarching Research Question**

In sum, I hold that what I have examined in this exploratory study was not a sudden, life-changing event for most of my interviewees, which was followed by transformative learning evolving over a period of time. Rather, the process was a sudden event, with a sudden realization or epiphanic feeling that directly led these individuals to choose to confront a changed reality through internal, deep reflection. In brief, first came acceptance of the new external situation and, then, internal acceptance of the Self, followed by information gathering. This entire learning process, which did evolve over a period of time, indicated profound changes in perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors. However, the changes and learning began early in the process and "compounded" as the process evolved. Moreover, the learning continues today.

For those participants who experienced what they perceived to be a negative event, their event signified a "wake-up call." They chose to give it their attention, set intentions, learned, and changed. As many expressed, their sudden, life-altering experience had deep, lasting impacts on many facets of their lives from that point onward, imparting life meaning and purpose, and enhancing the character strengths of courage, confidence, wisdom, gratitude, humility, giving to others, and appreciation of life. In examining an abbreviated process of the learning aspects alone, we see four basic types of successive learning for sudden, life-altering events, which I have labeled, metamorphic learning:

1. Sudden realization, epiphany, or feeling → Epiphanic learning
2. Accepting the Self and new ways to "be" → Self-directed, discovery learning

3. Healing and wisdom → Metamorphic learning
4. Continuous learning

In all, I feel the sudden realization or epiphany may be the key impetus that explains why my participants were able to assimilate and process their experience with "clarity" and then choose to move forward to learn and change, perceiving the meaning of their event as a message for either a need or an opportunity for change, and then integrating the subsequent complex, multi-faceted learning process into a new life situation, with redefined self-identities, perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors.

## Summary of Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, I presented my study findings organized by my research questions, and grouped within each of those areas by major emic themes that emerged about sudden, life-altering events from the stories of my participants. These findings represent my observations, conclusions, assessments, and interpretations that I inducted (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) in my data analysis, which involved triangulating each case with one another, relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, and my pilot study results (please see Appendix G). In my discussion and analyses, I sought patterns and deviations within my participants' stories, which led me to create an emic and in vivo definition of a sudden, life-altering event: Either a negative or positive event, but more often negative, which occurs suddenly, "in an instant," "abruptly," "overnight," "right then and there," or "within a matter of moments," and which is an event that the individual perceives as "defining," "dramatic," or "drastic," and that "shook" or "changed" "everything" they felt they were "dependent on," or "turned their world upside down." It represents a, if not

*the,* primary event in their lifetime, in which "foundations" change or are "destroyed" in "significant" ways afterward, as in an "abrupt transformation" or "huge shift." This event shortly thereafter incurs a period of being "stunned" or, more often, a state of "shock" and/or "numbness," which may range from lasting a few minutes to an entire year, although most commonly for a couple of days to a week. An individual may feel they have experienced more than one of these types of events, which may be related to one another, or one sudden, life-altering event may assist in "preparing" the individual for a later "significant" event, even when one event was not perceived as sudden or life-changing. This definition formed the contextual basis for my study, validated its significance and, in my view, its importance to study, and informs my grounded theory to come.

To summarize a response to my first subsidiary research question, the sudden, life-changing events the interviewees reported were both positive and negative, although more often negative (81.25%), and ranged from job loss, death of a loved one, meeting their soon-to-be spouse, separating from their life partner, their spouse leaving, grave illness, and other isolated events, such as showing off with a loaded gun, reading a groundbreaking research study, or adopting an ill dog. Every one of the participants described a complex, multi-faceted, and ongoing learning event that profoundly impacted their self-identity, direction, and quality of life thereafter.

In some respects, my participants' learning process met Mezirow's ten-step criteria (2009) of a transformative learning event. In contrast with his process, however, which begins with a "disorienting dilemma" as the "event," my interviewees' sudden, life-altering event itself was the *catalyst* for a learning and change process that differed in

both order and content. For example, critical reflection seemed to come before acceptance of their changed circumstances, or external acceptance. The two types of reflection, critical and self, were distinct processes, and self-examination did not begin in full until internal acceptance of the Self first occurred. Perhaps most important, this process was not linear for my participants but, rather, intertwined and cyclic, in parallel with Anthony's metaphor of a rollercoaster.

The many metaphors representing positive, organic regeneration the interviewees presented addressed my second subsidiary research question. Articulating feelings ranging from ambivalence to acceptance, and from sadness to emphatic gratitude, all those who reported a negative sudden, life-altering event shifted their perspectives to view their events as being positive at the time of our interview, or as a primary life event that had some positive outcomes.

In examining other ramifications for this type of learning event to respond to my third subsidiary research question, it is clear that my interviewees *chose* to look within to confront their changed situations. This internal discovery learning journey led to many impacts, including a more present-focused time orientation, healing, and new roles, including mentoring and teaching others, thereby positively affecting greater society. These individuals were thus able to express many of the character strengths they constructed out of the learning process in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering events, which fall within the six categories of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Anonymous, 2011a; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011). In fact, growth in the form of awakening to wisdom, especially self-wisdom and feelings of being a more

authentic, "better" Self, were a significant effect. What is of import is that all of the impacts were considered *positive* benefits.

The theme of moving forward was a repeating thread that wove throughout the findings from early on, and was revealed to be a guiding "mantra" of strength to continue through the "challenging" learning and change process, toward healing and growth. In grasping a better understanding of the construct of healing, I uncovered two aspects to it: (a) healing from the event, itself, which applied to those who experienced an event they perceived as negative, and (b) healing from life prior to the event. Both aspects brought closure to my participants, on all the physical, cognitive, and spiritual levels. With closure, these individuals were then empowered to perceive the benefits their events brought, such as strength, gratitude, a simpler, less stressful life and career, redefined notions of success, joy and happiness, and overall wellbeing. Additionally, their learning and change process positively informed subsequent learning events. As all of the participants expressed, their sudden, life-altering experience had deep, lasting impact on many facets of their lives from that point onward. For some, it served as a guiding light, imparting life meaning, purpose, and enhanced self-worth, while building the character strengths of courage, confidence, wisdom, gratitude, humility, giving to others, and appreciation of life, along their paths to metamorphosis and continuous learning.

Arriving at the point where I could respond to my overarching research question about the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, I found that, for many of my participants, some aspects of the learning and change process were immediate. For most, however, the learning remains a complex, multi-faceted, and ongoing journey, without a destination. A negative sudden, life-

altering event was a "wake-up call" for these individuals. They *chose* to give it their attention, set intentions, learned, and changed through what I saw were the following four basic types of learning in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering events:

1. Sudden realization, epiphany, or feeling → Epiphanic learning
2. Accepting and redefining the Self → Self-directed, discovery learning
3. Healing and wisdom, becoming more "authentic" → Metamorphic learning
4. Continuous learning

In all, I feel my finding of a sudden realization, epiphany, or feeling may be the key impetus that explains why my participants were able to process their experience with "clarity" and subsequently choose to move forward to learn and change, perceiving the meaning of their event as a message for either a need or an opportunity for change, and then integrating their complex, multi-faceted learning process into a new life situation, with redefined self-identities, perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors.

To conclude this chapter, I present a refined, 14-step learning process, which I perceived was experienced by my participants, and which I have labeled, metamorphic learning:

1. Sudden, life-altering event, either positive or negative (similar to Mezirow's Stage 1)
2. Shock, numb, or stunned state
3. Sudden realization, which may occur before, during, or after Step 2. Secondary sudden realizations may follow in Steps 5-8.

4. Preliminary instinctive action for some to manage immediate constraints and barriers, which may be in conjunction with Step 2
5. Choice → assimilation and critical reflective practice (for some), which may include reconciliation of inner conflict with pre-event external behavior and lifestyle (similar to Mezirow's Stages 3 and 4) in a construction of meaning
6. Acceptance of external changed circumstances → redefined reality
7. Acceptance of internal Self → "release" to move forward
8. Self-examination through reflective practice (similar to Mezirow's Stage 2), including thought, prayer, writing, journaling, meditation, and other methods, as well as more critical reflection, for some, as a learning tool → beginning of learning and growth, redefining authentic Self, perspectives, assumptions, priorities, etc. Note that this step is ongoing practice for many.
9. Considering opportunities, exploring options for new roles, relations, and action (Mezirow's Stage 5), and making decisions for action (similar to Mezirow's Stage 6) → may include creating or modifying a vision, life plan, and/or goals, as well as a change in time orientation. Note that this is a longer, continuously evolving phase.
10. Moving forward to acquire knowledge and/or skills through self-directed, discovery learning for best managing changed reality, and/or executing vision/plan/goals → redefinition (similar to Mezirow's Stage 7). Includes trying new roles (Mezirow's Stage 8), redefining life priorities, and may include realizing life purpose. Note that this step is ongoing practice for many.
11. Clarity → making more decisions for action

12. Moving forward to take action → metamorphic learning, expressing new or enhanced strengths, such as confidence and courage, and substantive behavior change (in part, similar to Mezirow's Stage 9)
13. Integration (similar to Mezirow's Stage 10) → includes:
    a. Self-actualization and/or self-transcendence
    b. Benefits of healing, growth, spirituality, simplicity, present-moment focus, gratitude, strength and courage, success in vocation, awakening, wellbeing, happiness, a "better" Self, and/or wisdom
14. Continuous learning and growth

This was an exploratory study, and what I hold as significant findings that led to my construction of the learning and change process I interpreted from the aftermath of my participants' described events would necessitate a larger research effort to test their validity. Nonetheless, this 14-step metamorphic learning process leads to the preliminary grounded theory and model I present in the next and final chapter, to complete my quest to examine the learning process for some adults who reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event.

# Chapter 5: Theory, Model, and Interpretations

"In times of change, learners inherit the earth; while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." ~ Eric Hoffer

This final chapter stands as the culmination of my exploratory inquiry into the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. I begin with a brief summary of my inquiry, followed by a brief review of what I feel are my main findings. Next, I present the primary focus of this inquiry, which was to induct preliminary theory grounded from the data I collected, with a corresponding visual model. After the theory and model, I discuss my researcher's interpretations and what I perceive are potential implications for practice, and then suggest ideas for future research before closing.

## Summary

To summarize this exploratory inquiry, I review my research goals, the research questions I proposed, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that supported my study, the methodological approach I designed and implemented, and what I perceive are the main findings.

### Research Goals

The central purpose of my exploratory research was to study adults who reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. To this end, my research goals were to:

- Explore qualitatively what these individuals learned and how by examining reported paradigm shifts that occurred, along with any consequential redefinitions or permanent changes in perspectives, assumptions, beliefs,

priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event.

- Generate preliminary grounded theory and a model for the adult learning process involved.
- Discover if any of my findings indicate value for future study and contribution to the literature in adult learning, positive psychology, and/or mental health.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question that led my inquiry was:

- What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event?

To develop this primary research question, I examined the following three sub-questions:

- What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event?
- Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why?
- What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event?

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Three conceptual frameworks supported my humanistic theoretical interpretations herein. Primarily, I drew upon transformative learning theory as originally conceived by Mezirow (1991, 2009), who considered it to be the most significant learning in adulthood. As a theory of adult learning, or andragogy (Knowles, 1970), transformative

learning promotes deep change, as individuals are challenged or motivated to question, ponder, and evaluate their personal assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs, all of which inform their espoused values and actual behaviors (Cranton, 2006).

The second framework that lent understanding of the learning process for a sudden, life-altering event was humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation, as conveyed through his hierarchy of needs. His amended model includes a sixth self-transcendence level that redefined his philosophy about the purpose of life, according to Koltko-Rivera (2006).

The third contributing paradigm in my study was positive psychology (Seligman, 2002, 2011), which focuses on positive emotions, character attributes, and a strengths-based approach to learning and thriving. Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide a framework that classifies 24 character strengths under the six historically and culturally universal virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence.

**Methodological Approach**

**Sample**. Out of the 205 respondents who accessed my self-designed pilot study survey (given in Appendix C), with a valid sample of 186 individuals, 121 reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, or 65.1% (See Table G.1 in Appendix G). Nearly half of the 121 volunteered to be interviewed. I initially attempted to select participants at random, but had numerous issues in making contact with those in the interview sample pool, as I described in Chapter 4. In the end, I was able to contact and interview 16 of the 60 from this pool.

Originally, I felt that one and possibly two of the interviewees did not meet my selection criteria for having experienced a "sudden," life-changing event. This criteria

was the affirmation of: "I feel that I have experienced a sudden, life-changing event. Specifically, I changed my perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event." After consideration, I decided that these participants did belong in my study, simply because perception and meaning *are* subjective; if these individuals believed that they had experienced this type of event, then I did not wish to discredit their perception. The total number of interview hours I recorded approximated 30, with additional data gathered from follow-up emails, emerging thematic inquiries, and member checking. Each of the 16 interviews involved approximately one month of full-time devotion to transcribing and preliminary analysis.

**Grounded theory methodology.** The methodological approach I followed for my study was grounded theory, which entailed collecting data through continually successive sampling from the pool of survey respondents. My coding and analysis process involved constant interaction with each participant's data, along with contrasting and comparing previous participants' data, to ultimately create and refine the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2002, 2009; Glesne, 2010; Maxwell, 2005). Featuring my own extended, holistic version of grounded theory method, my research strategy was designed to address threats to credibility and validity (Maxwell, 2005), including those inherent in the process of participant selection and researcher interpretation bias.

This research design offered me the opportunity to gather, compare, and analyze data from multiple perspectives in depth. In this process, I inductively and reflexively created some preliminary assertions, theory, and a model, which I hope furthers understanding of the adult learning process that follows the subjective experience of sudden, life-altering events.

**Major Findings**

The qualitative researcher cannot generalize from a small sample to a greater population, although I do believe that we can learn much from the study of individuals. With my 16 interviewees, I did see clear trends, patterns, and commonalities emerge, although the referenced events and individuals were widely diverse. As I noted in Chapter 4, the findings presented in that chapter that I review here are my observations, assessments, and interpretations, which I inducted (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) from my interviewees' narratives.

**Definition of a sudden, life-altering event.** As discussed in Chapter 4, I intentionally left the phenomenon I was studying undefined. Forming the contextual basis for my inquiry, validating its significance and, in my view, its importance to study, and informing my grounded theory to come, an *emic* (Maxwell, 2005) and *in vivo* (Creswell, 2007) definition of a sudden, life-altering event emerged from my data analysis to lead my findings: Either a negative or positive event, but more often negative, which occurs suddenly, "in an instant," "abruptly," "overnight," "right then and there," or "within a matter of moments," and which is an event that the individual perceives as "defining," "dramatic," or "drastic," and that "shook" or "changed" "everything" they felt they were "dependent on," or "turned their world upside down." It represents a, if not *the,* primary event in their lifetime, in which "foundations" change or are "destroyed" in "significant" ways afterward, as in an "abrupt transformation" or "huge shift." This event shortly thereafter incurs a period of being "stunned" or, more often, a state of "shock" and/or "numbness," which may range from lasting a few minutes to an entire year, although most commonly for a couple of days to a week. An individual may feel

they have experienced more than one of these types of events, which may be related to one another, or one sudden, life-altering event may assist in "preparing" the individual for a later "significant" event, even when one event was not perceived as being sudden or life-changing.

**What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event?** To summarize a response to my first subsidiary research question, the sudden, life-changing events my participants reported were both positive and negative, although more often negative, and ranged from job loss, death of a loved one, meeting their soon-to-be spouse, separation from a life partner, their spouse leaving, and grave illness, to other isolated events, such as showing off with a loaded gun, reading a groundbreaking research study, and adopting a very ill dog. Every one of the participants described a complex, multi-faceted, and on-going learning event that profoundly impacted their self-identity, direction, and quality of life thereafter.

In some respects, my participants' learning process met Mezirow's ten-step criteria of a transformative learning event (2009), which I discussed in Chapter 4, including comparing his process with the 14-step process I presented in that chapter's summary. In contrast with his process, however, which begins with a "disorienting dilemma" as the "event," my interviewees' sudden, life-altering event itself served as a *catalyst* for a learning and change process that differed in both order and content. For example, critical reflection seemed to come before acceptance of their changed circumstances, or external acceptance. The two types of reflection, critical and self, were distinct processes, and self-examination did not begin in full until internal acceptance of

the Self first occurred. Perhaps most important, this process was not linear for my participants but, rather, intertwined and cyclic, in parallel with Anthony's metaphor of a rollercoaster. These differences lie behind what I perceive is a distinct adult learning and change process, which I labeled as metamorphic learning and discuss further under the *Interpretation of Findings* section.

**Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why?** The many metaphors representing positive, organic regeneration the interviewees presented addressed my second subsidiary research question. Articulating feelings ranging from ambivalence to acceptance, and from sadness to emphatic gratitude, all those who reported a negative sudden, life-altering event shifted their perspectives to view their events as being a beneficial, positive learning event at the time of our interview, or as a primary life event that had some positive learning and growth outcomes. The specific metaphors were given in Chapter 4.

**What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event?** I examined other impacts of this type of learning event to respond to my third subsidiary research question. It is clear that my interviewees *chose* to journey within and directly confront their changed situations through reflective practice. This self-directed, discovery learning process initiated far-reaching impacts, including a more present-focused time orientation and healing. Further, it led to individuation and actualizing new life and work roles that involved mentoring and teaching others, thereby positively impacting greater society. As a benefit of redefining their Selves and their lives, these individuals were thus able to express many found character strengths in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering

events, which fall within the six categories of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Anonymous, 2011a; Lopez & Snyder, 2009; Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder et al., 2011).

The theme of moving forward was a clear, repeating metaphorical thread that wove throughout my findings from early on, and was revealed to be a guiding "mantra" of strength to continue through this "challenging" learning and change process, and realize healing and growth. In grasping a better understanding of the construct of healing, I uncovered two aspects to it: (a) healing from the event itself, which applied to those who experienced an event they perceived as negative, and (b) healing from life prior to the event. Both aspects of healing served as acceptance and closure for my participants, on all the physical, cognitive, and spiritual levels, prior to integration. In coming to closure, these individuals were then "empowered," as Claire expressed so well, to perceive lifelong benefits such as strength, gratitude, a simpler, less stressful life, careers that aligned with their hearts, redefined notions of success, joy and happiness, and overall greater wellbeing.

Of note, the learning and change process my participants went through positively informed subsequent learning events in their lives. In fact, growth in the form of awakening to wisdom, especially self-wisdom and feelings of individuation and becoming a more authentic, "better" Self, was a significant resulting benefit described by many of the participants. What is of most import is that the majority of the impacts were considered *positive*.

**What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a**

**sudden, life-altering event?** Arriving at the point where I could respond to my overarching research question after studying the learning process for a few adults who reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, I found that, for many of my participants, some aspects of the learning and change process were immediate. For most, however, the learning remains an ongoing, constructive journey, which is a finding that surprised me. Indeed, their sudden, life-altering event itself was somewhat of a "wake-up call" that spawned long-term, continuous learning and change. What I feel is of note is that my participants *chose* to give it their attention, set intentions, learned, and changed through the following four basic types of learning:

1. Sudden realization, epiphany, or feeling → Epiphanic learning
2. Accepting and redefining the Self → Self-directed, discovery learning
3. Healing and wisdom, becoming more "authentic" → Metamorphic learning
4. Continuous learning

Overall, I concluded that my finding of the sudden realization or epiphany may potentially be a key *impetus* that gives us insight about why my participants were able to "move forward," some rather quickly, to process their experience and subsequently learn and change from it. In other words, they perceived the meaning of their event as a motivating message for either a need or an opportunity to change and, then, integrated the ensuing complex, multi-faceted learning and growth process into a new life situation, with redefined self-identities, perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors. In the end, this motivation resulted in several of my participants realizing one or both of the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; 1943), which are self-actualization and self-transcendence.

I feel that my participants' practice of reflection is a finding in and of itself. Turning *toward* sudden life upheaval requires character strengths, such as courage and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994), that many individuals may lack, especially in the face of some types of adversity, such as a confrontation with mortality. For some of the participants, it seemed to represent a need to resolve a struggle between fate and a sense of control in their lives. For others, it was more of a motivation to define a new reality. For still others, it was a path to redefine their idea of the Self. This affirms why I likened the entire learning process with the biological process of metamorphosis, wherein a caterpillar spends time wrapped in its chrysalis before emerging as a more beautiful butterfly. Indeed, the very act of reflection signifies a choice, subconscious or not, to look inward for "clarity," and for a more authentic Self to emerge and take control.

It almost seems as if any search for connection between the event and discontent with life before was embedded more so in an inherent, more positive *construction* of *meaning* for the interviewees, rather than an intentional discontented quest for blame or fate-driven *purpose*. In some ways, we might view this piece of the learning process as "social deconstructive unlearning," or epistemological change, as well as individuation, which was inherent in many of the participants' descriptions of their reflective content.

**14-step metamorphic learning process.** I now present a refined, 14-step learning process, which I perceived was experienced by my participants through my examination of their narratives, and which I labeled as metamorphic learning:

1. Sudden, life-altering event, either positive or negative
2. Shock, numb, or stunned state

3. Sudden realization, which may be before, during, or after Step 2. Secondary sudden realizations may follow in Steps 5-8.
4. Preliminary instinctive action for some to manage immediate constraints and barriers, which may be in conjunction with Step 2
5. Choice → assimilation and critical reflective practice (for some), which may include reconciliation of inner conflict with pre-event external behavior and lifestyle in a construction of meaning = social deconstructive unlearning
6. Acceptance of external changed circumstances → redefined reality
7. Acceptance of internal Self → "release" to move forward to reconstruct
8. Self-examination through reflective practice, including thought, prayer, writing, journaling, meditation, and other methods, as well as more critical reflection for some, as a learning tool → beginning of learning and growth, redefining authentic Self, perspectives, assumptions, priorities, etc. This step may be ongoing practice.
9. Considering opportunities, exploring options for new roles, relations, and action, and making decisions for action → may include creating or modifying a vision, life plan, and/or goals, as well as a change in time orientation. Note that this is typically a longer, continuously evolving phase.
10. Moving forward → acquiring knowledge and/or skills through self-directed, discovery learning for best managing changed reality, and/or executing vision/plan/goals → redefinition and individuation. Includes trying new roles, and may include realizing life purpose. This step may be ongoing practice.
11. Clarity → making more decisions for action

12. Moving forward to take action → metamorphic learning, expressing new or enhanced strengths, such as courage and confidence, and substantive behavior change
13. Integration → realizing or perceiving:
    a. Self-actualization and/or self-transcendence
    b. Benefits of healing, growth, spirituality, simplicity, present-moment focus, gratitude, strength and courage, success in vocation, awakening, wellbeing, happiness, a better Self, and/or wisdom
14. Continuous learning and growth

This 14-step metamorphic learning process, along with the definition of a sudden, life-altering event that emerged, led to my preliminary grounded theory and model, which I present next.

## Preliminary Theory of Metamorphic Learning and Model

I present first my preliminary theory of metamorphic learning, and then my model, both of which represent an abstraction of the data I collected and analyzed from interviewing several adults who reported experiencing a sudden, life-altering event.

### Preliminary Theory of Metamorphic Learning

The metamorphic learning process commences with a sudden, life-altering event, which I previously defined. Some individuals take preliminary instinctive action after the event to manage immediate constraints and barriers, which may be in conjunction with a state of shock. Ironically, this is often expressed as "not functioning," but is really a period of time where taking action is required, albeit without much corresponding cognitive thought (i.e., instinctive reaction or functioning automatically). Most

individuals experience a sudden realization, epiphany, or "knowing" feeling, which may occur before, during, or at the end of the period of shock. While the event serves as a facilitative catalyst, this realization is a motivating impetus to move forward, indicating a choice to journey within, rather than to escape, deny, or disassociate, which directs the cognitive practice of reflection that follows. Some individuals may experience more than one epiphanic learning realization. The choice to move forward is toward assimilation of the event and their changed reality, along with more critical reflective practice for some. This evaluation may include reconciliation of inner conflict with pre-event behavior and lifestyle as a means to construct meaning from the event. The critical reflection piece is, thus, what I label as "social deconstructive unlearning," wherein perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors prior to the event are brought to the forefront, questioned, and, essentially, revised or reconstructed.

Emerging from this period of critical reflection—of the Self, life before the event, and changed circumstances—is cognitive external acceptance, which results in a redefined, more positive perception of reality with new possibilities and opportunities for change. Next comes acceptance of the internal Self, which is the necessary "release" that is needed to continue moving forward in the learning and change process. Now, deep self-examination begins through contemplative practice, such as thought, prayer, writing, journaling, or meditation, and may involve more critical reflection used intentionally by some as a learning tool. It is this self-examination process that signals the beginning of learning and growth, wherein individuation may occur for some, and a more "authentic" Self is found or redefined, along with transformed perspectives, assumptions, beliefs,

priorities in life, and/or behaviors. Note that this step is an ongoing practice for many because of the benefits that better understanding of the Self brings.

Following self-examination is a longer, continuously evolving, dynamic phase, in which opportunities are considered, role options are explored, new relationships begin, and decisions for interim or pathway action are made. This step of redefining reality and priorities in life may include creating or modifying a personal vision, life plan, and/or goals, as well as a change in time orientation, typically to more of a present-moment focus. The individual then moves forward to actively acquire new knowledge and/or skills through self-directed, discovery learning for best managing their changed reality, and/or executing their new or redefined vision, life plan, or goals. In this step, the Self is redefined and validated, as new roles are tried and life purpose may be realized. Note that this step is also an ongoing practice for many.

Out of the discovery process, what emerges is the gift of "clarity," and a time to make more decisions, as the individual moves forward to transfer learning and decision making into concrete action. Thus, metamorphic learning is realized. Integration in a redefined reality is apparent through the expression of new or enhanced character strengths, such as wisdom, courage, and confidence, along with substantive behavior changes, as the individual assumes new roles that may be driven by Maslow's (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; 1943) higher-order motivating needs of self-actualization and/or self-transcendence. At the same time, the benefits of healing, growth, spirituality, simplicity, present-moment focus, gratitude, strength and courage, success in vocation, awakening, wellbeing, happiness, a more authentic, "better" Self, and/or wisdom are realized. This learning and growth process endures in a "compounded" manner.

**Model of the Metamorphic Learning Process**

A model is an analytic deduction that visually simplifies a process, and is not meant to depict the subjective uniqueness of the individual experience. Figure 5.1 is my model of the metamorphic learning process, drawn from the words and related experiences of my participants that informed my preliminary theory. Because no two participants used the same words to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, a common construct was necessary to abstract the more general, collective process shown.

Figure 5.1. Model of the Metamorphic Learning Process

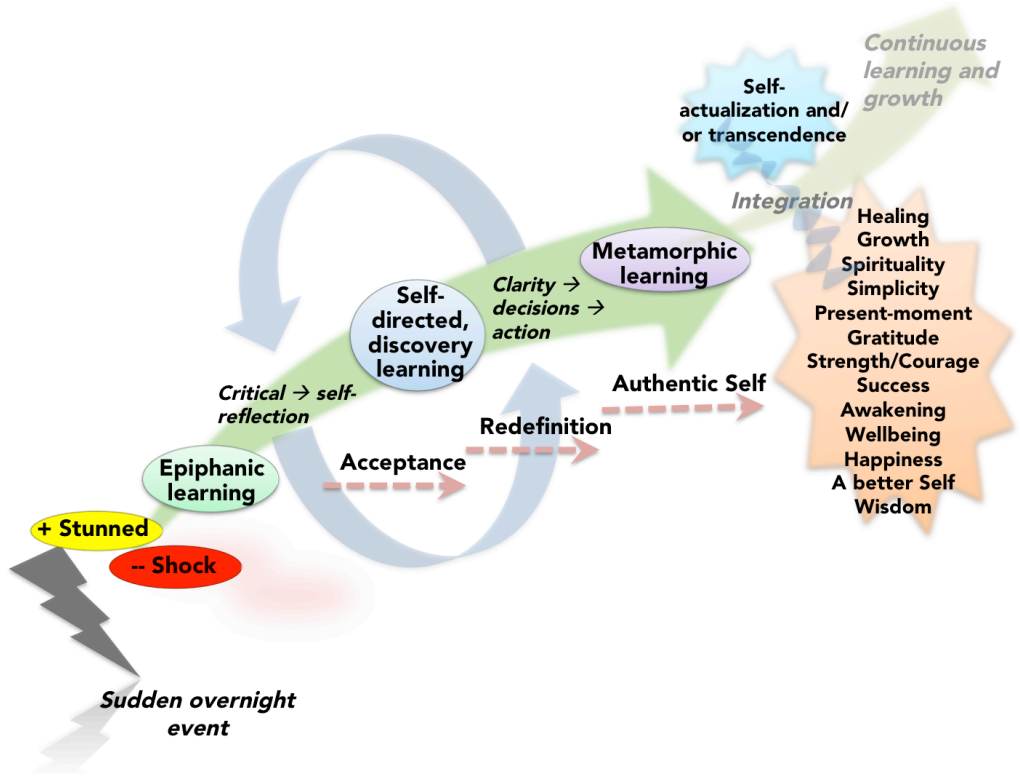



*Figure 5.1.* Model of the metamorphic learning process, depicting a multilevel, circular, forward-moving and complex process of acceptance and redefinition. This learning and growth process commences after a sudden, life-altering event, and moves through epiphanic learning, self-directed, discovery learning, and metamorphic learning. The process culminates in the integration of the authentic Self, to realize self-actualization and/or self-transcendence on the one hand, and the benefits of metamorphic learning, on the other.

Most theories of learning I have reviewed are linear and successive, including many traditional transformative learning theories. In this model, I strove to depict the multilevel and circular reflective learning process I interpreted from my participants' narratives. This finding correlates with Brown (2006), who holds that individuals change through an affective, intuitive, inner process, rather than a rational, cognitive, social sequence. Similarly, Dirkx and Smith (2009) focus on emotional, spiritual, and symbolic aspects, referring to transformative learning as inner "soul" work. Even with the circling back and forth between steps in the process, we see that there is continuous progress, or "moving forward," toward metamorphic learning. This is the point where integration of the individual's redefined, "authentic" Self is realized, and signifies when a negative sudden, life-altering experience ceases to thought of as "bad." Instead, the event is now viewed as a beneficial learning and growth experience, and manifests as self-actualization and/or self-transcendence on the one hand, with the subsequent benefits on the other hand of healing, growth, simplicity, present-moment focus, gratitude, strength and courage, success in vocation and life, awakening, greater wellbeing, happiness, a "better" Self, and/or wisdom.

Note that shock (or feeling stunned with a positive event), when the psyche abandons the body, is the antithesis of integration. With shock at the beginning of the metamorphic learning process, and integration at the end, what lies in between is the complex process of redefining from a chrysalis to a butterfly. While the event is, in essence, a catalyst that brings forth "authenticity" or "truth," the sudden epiphany seems to be "grounding" for the participants, in that it reveals an early lesson to provide clarity,

realization of, and, then, commitment to then construct a new reality. As John expressed, such events can represent "the ultimate deadline."

I viewed the movement from critical to self-reflection as important. It is commonly known to educators that formal education and transformative learning promote critical thinking but, when it comes to matters of the Self, I suggest less criticism and more nonjudgmental exploration are healthier in the reflective process, which is indeed the overall premise that is promoted in the field of positive psychology. I concur with Linley and Joseph (2004) that the process of learning and growth from profound change truly begins with acceptance, but I note that this act requires self-compassion. Thus, the arrow under *Acceptance* in my model depicts the beginning of moving toward *Redefinition* of the Self*,* which represents a primary individuation process that many of my participants affirmed. Likewise, the arrow under the *Authentic Self* depicts the moving forward to then integrate the redefined Self into a new reality. The arrows also represent the common theme, or motivating "mantra," of moving forward toward ongoing, "incremental" evolution.

The learning processes depicted in the model—epiphanic learning; reflection, or social deconstructive unlearning and reconstruction; and self-directed, discovery learning—inform the metamorphic learning that was realized. Viewed together, it adds up to deep learning and change, and positive benefits. Next, I discuss my researcher's interpretation and what I view are some implications of my findings.

## Interpretation of Findings

When "something big" is imposed on you unexpectedly, you can allow it to define and destroy you, or strengthen and improve you. It is well known and documented

in the field of psychology that many individuals go into denial or destabilization, and may run away, disassociate, or remain hyper-activated out of fear or unwillingness to address a negative event through an honest self-assessment and learning process that can heal and integrate the experience with the psyche for wellbeing. As Glenn astutely noted, "I think people change by the way they feel or their emotional situation more than they do by their intellectual level."

I do not view the shift my participants experienced as resilience, which Kevin spoke of, and which is so often discussed in relation to the topic of change (Dunn et al., 2009; Fredrickson et al., 2003; Lepore & Revenson, 2006/2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Nor do I feel is it related to the similar construct of the hedonic treadmill (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). What the majority of my interviewees expressed was a holistic growth or regeneration process, with a different, "turned upside down," but "definitely better" and more "authentic" quality of life afterward, versus adapting and returning to normal. This may indicate that constructing the *meaning* of their sudden, life-altering event through self-directed, discovery learning, rather than perceiving their event as a *purposeful* experience, may be one of the keys to positive change in the face of adversity. This may also explain why my participants interpreted their negative events as having positive benefits.

Furthermore, the clinical psychology concept of posttraumatic growth does not encompass individuals who experience a positive sudden, life-altering event. To this end, I suggest a new construct to label what my participants experienced: "post-event redefinition." This term not only encompasses growth from both positive and negative

events, it also incorporates the transformative impact on self-identity, direction, and quality of life my participants described in their narratives.

I see a parallel with coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Crane, 2010; "CTI," 2009; Reeves & Allison, 2010) in much of the learning process I abstracted. Just as with coaching, reflection is a method of defining ways of thinking, being, and doing that can lead the way to health, wellbeing, and psychological stability. Essentially, the participants' reflective practice seemed to be a two-stage process of, first, critical reflection, which we might correlate with traditional therapy and, second, self-coaching, which commenced with acceptance of the event, the change in reality, and then the Self. Whereas traditional therapy or counseling cognitively and emotionally inspects the past for answers, the self-reflective learning process is more of a positive construction of opportunities for new perspectives, different behaviors, and future actions that better align with the heart and soul, to respond to a change in the here and now. Indeed, in both reflection and coaching, the answers lie within.

Lange (2004) views experiential learning as a catalyst for positive transformation. While I believe my study establishes that significant learning evolves from the type of profound events my participants experienced, the metamorphic learning process is not experiential because the event itself is over before the learning commences. Moreover, the 14-step process I outlined for the metamorphic learning process demonstrates that my findings differ from Mezirow's (2009) definition of transformative learning, in order, process, and content. Mezirow (1997) noted that transformative learning can occur as a result of a traumatic experience, but holds that this is less common than its occurrence through formal education. Following one of Habermas' theories, Mezirow (1997)

stressed that transformative learning is predicated in communication, or dialogue, as a catalyst, and not necessarily linked with important life events. I hold that education, be it formal, on-the-job training, or informal, self-directed research is one path only for transformative learning. In fact, I might point out that Mezirow's study participants may very well have experienced a significant event before they decided to return to school later in life, and the education piece I surmise was likely a part of their overall learning process, just as it was for many of my participants.

Mezirow (1997) viewed transformative learning as a social constructivist learning process, meaning that people in an individual's circle of influence, as well as other external factors, such as the environment, help the individual construct or co-create learning. In contrast, I believe the learning process my participants experienced primarily involved self-directed, constructivist (Vygotsky, 1978), discovery-learning. Only a few mentioned, almost as an aside, others who had supported them along the way in some minor aspects. In fact, for these individuals, constructivist epistemology was an *evolution* from social constructivism, in that many of them mentioned how, prior to their life-changing event, they learned and did what others imposed on them, or what was taught and shown to them by their families, friends, and our Western education and culture. Again, this affirms why I refer to my participants' learning process as "social deconstructive unlearning and reconstruction," wherein they shed what society and others told them they should do in life and work, and constructed a different self "story," or individuated, through internal reflection first, before manifesting it externally. In essence, they seemed to have found their inner wisdom and a more authentic identity through post-event redefinition.

In contrast with Mezirow's conception of transformative learning, Boyd and Myers (1988) proposed a model of transformative education based on analytical depth psychology, asserting that transformation is an inner journey of individuation, or a lifelong process of understanding through reflection on the psychological structures (ego, shadow, persona, and collective unconscious) that comprise our self-identity. As reviewed by Dirkx (2000), transformation for Boyd involves a fundamental change in personality that involves the resolution of a personal dilemma and an expansion of consciousness through reflection, ultimately resulting in greater personality integration. For Boyd, three key processes that lead to transformation are receptivity, recognition, and grieving, and it is only through transformative learning that significant change can occur in an individual's psychosocial development. For this scholar, the purpose of perspective transformation is to free the individual from unconscious assumptions and cultural norms that constrain self-actualization, which I note is at the top of Maslow's (1943) classic hierarchy of needs. Finally, Boyd holds that transformative learning is a long-term process that involves reconciling the first half of life and meaningfully integrating it with the second half.

Similarly, Dirkx and Smith (2009) focus on emotional, spiritual, and symbolic aspects, referring to transformative learning as inner "soul work." In contrast to other scholars, they maintain that the irrational unconscious most influences our behavior. Rather than Mezirow's view of transformative learning, I feel that my participants' learning and change process better aligns with Boyd's, Dirkx' and Smith's views of transformative learning, as well as with Brown's (2006), whereby individuals learn and change through primarily an affective, intuitive, inner process, rather than a rational,

cognitive, social sequence. To me, this reveals a more holistic, self-oriented, and constructive definition of transformative learning, and could encompass the learning and change that can come from experiencing sudden life events, if more transformative theorists were to include such learning in their theories.

While the outcomes of metamorphic learning are similar to those of transformative learning, the process I inducted from the data I collected involved what I saw as more than the transformative learning piece, and included other types of learning, which I defined as epiphanic learning, self-directed, discovery learning, metamorphic learning, and continuous learning. In other words, although the process I conceptualized as metamorphic learning correlates with many aspects of Boyd, Dirkx, Smith, and Brown's theories of transformative learning, I perceive a larger, more complex learning and change process that prioritizes more informal, internal learning, with formal education serving, in some cases, as an assistive instrument in the overall process.

Indeed, Merriam and Clark (1993) found the majority of learning experiences are informal, and concluded that, for such learning to be significant, it must be of value to the individual and either expand their knowledge or cause transformation. I feel that the data I collected supports their position, as far as informal learning from sudden, life-altering events. Transformative adult learning research has emphasized formal education contexts, whereas informal learning has not been studied as much. In sum, I do perceive many theorists' definitions of transformative learning, including Mezirow's, as being compatible with aspects of the broader metamorphic learning process I described herein. In chapter 1, I defined transformative learning as "a process of learning in adults who can make abstractions, which involves the ability to re-evaluate and significantly change their

perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, values, attitudes, and/or behaviors." After conducting this inquiry, I would not alter that general definition because it encompasses learning from both informal and formal learning contexts, and could also include learning from sudden, life-altering events.

**The Reticence of Wisdom**

In all, I align with my participants' perspectives, in that the events such as what they experienced are some of the greatest teachers of all. As I see it, these types of events impose metamorphosis through a learning process that integrates and aligns an individual's psyche with their transformed situations in work and life. A discussion is in order on my observation that many of my participants were either reticent about acknowledging that their sudden, life-altering event brought them wisdom, or completely denied it. As I noted in my literature review, I do not necessarily agree with Bleyl's (2009) suggestion that wisdom may represent completion of the life-stage development process, and affirm my perspective after conducting this study with many individuals who were not near that stage. However, her views on wisdom hold merit for my findings. Specifically, in her interviews with 19 individuals nominated as being wise by their peers, Bleyl identified the following characteristics in common:

- They are grateful
- They live disciplined and principled lives
- They are honed by adversity
- They thirst for knowledge and understanding
- They exhibit discernment and good judgment
- They have uncommon common sense

- They are reflective and introspective
- They exemplify self-sufficiency
- They seek balance in all things
- They are altruistic and seek the common good
- They are humble (pp. 265-268).

We can see from the narratives of my interviewees that most of these same qualities appeared in common with them, as well. For instance, Glenn, Alice, and Jane expressed gratitude for their sudden, life-altering experience, voicing the word, "gift." All of my participants practiced reflection. And the majority showed altruism and concern for the common good, in wanting to help, mentor, and teach others. Their questioning about being wise indicates their very humbleness.

As a subjective topic, wisdom has been a great topic of debate throughout the years as to what it is, who has it, and how they got it. In the learning and change processes my participants described, I perceive the quality of wisdom as an unfolding umbrella, beginning to open with "clarity," which Christy first voiced, and fully opening with an awakened, more authentic Self. I hold that this umbrella of wisdom will buffer these individuals as they walk through the future storms that are sure to cross their paths, much like Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory about positive emotions building resources. In light of my participant's reluctance to think of themselves as wise, I hereby nominate them as such. Their wisdom evolved from accepting their changed realities and listening to their inner Selves, with the willingness and courage to do the hard "soul work" (Dirkx & Smith, 2009) of introspection, therein learning how to better themselves and their quality of life, as well as positively impact the lives of many others.

**Storytelling and Vicarious Learning**

Our life trajectories are characterized by ups and downs, or the yin and the yang, from which we construct meaning and story, as a means of finding equilibrium. We can learn much from sharing our stories with others. The embedded construct of vicarious learning, also known as observational learning, is a form of informal, social learning from role models. Narrative and vicarious learning are primary types of learning in non-Western cultures (Merriam & Associates, 2007), but are not discussed much in the field of adult learning.

Defining "story" as a narrative of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and achieve a goal, Haven (2007) purports that stories teach others well because they parallel how we inherently perceive, assimilate, think, and learn. He reviewed research that focuses on how stories connect to our prior knowledge, provide memorable details, and improve our comprehension. Indeed, Kevin shared:

> There's a verse in the Bible, and I can't think of where it is right now. But it basically says, I think it's in, ah, *Second Thessalonians* but, basically, the idea is, one of the reasons why bad things happen to us, is so that we can comfort others with the comfort with which we have been comforted. And, so, you know, that's what I do, and I believe this verse describes reality, ah, *completely*. And I am able to encourage other people going through very difficult times, ahm, *because* I've been through times like that.

Socrates taught us that an effective teacher challenges, instructs, motivates, inspires, and leads learners to find the answers for themselves. The sudden, life-changing events my participants experienced took on that role and changed their lives and work for

the better, even when they involved adversity. In the same way, stories about sudden, life-altering events can motivate and inspire others. It is commonly said that we learn from making our own mistakes but, when others can share their experiences and we are open to listening, we can vicariously learn from them and, hopefully, not have to experience the same event to reflect and choose to change. Instead, we can use their wisdom to question our own assumptions, beliefs, and values, and find the courage to surmount our own adversity, for a better quality of life in the here and now. Indeed, people who share their stories serve as role models of wisdom, gratitude, and humility, imparting empathy, strength, courage, encouragement, support, hope, triumph, and a host of other positive effects that can expand others' lives. This defines self-transcendence, wherein reality is no longer centered on "me" or "them" but, rather, on "we" and "us." When an experiential story is told to others, it becomes shared wisdom, opening and connecting perspectives, thereby raising collective consciousness.

**Interview as healing**. Many of the participants voluntarily shared with me that our interview dialogue about their experiences was healing for them, and that their involvement contributed clarity in how they viewed their experience. I was surprised by this positive feedback, which illuminates the "power" of sharing our stories. Just as Jane expressed:

> I so enjoy speaking with you, Joan. Because, then, I'm able, I *feel* things. But I, I cannot feel things with you. I actually have to verbalize them. And this is helping me *tremendously*, and I cannot thank you enough for doing that for me. It's been *very* helpful. . . . I have come so far as a human being from where I was, you know, ten years ago that, I, again, I go back to, I'm enjoying, ahm, ahm,

being who I am. You know, I just *so* enjoy it. And, and, I never . . . you know, you force me to put into words why I enjoy being *who* I am.

Likewise, Claire said, "It's helping me just to be a part of it." Anthony stated, "I'm glad I did [this]. In so many ways, it helped and healed, as well." Karen, in reflecting on the wisdom she felt she gained after losing her mother so suddenly, acknowledged during our interview, "I guess those are things that, I guess if I thought about it, and I've never really thought about it, you know, as a positive thing."

The healing impact of our interviews may or may not be related to the fact that, for various reasons, very few of my participants sought counseling or spoke with others about their event. Some said that such assistance was either not available at that time in our history, just was not offered, or was unhelpful or refused. This too may explain why many of the participants wish now to help others through the wisdom of their experiences. As Miller and C'de Baca (2004; William R. Miller & C'de Baca, 2001) found, their participants believed that they were alone in having experienced such profound events. The 65.1% from my pilot study who stated they have experienced a sudden, life-altering event shows that, clearly, they are not (see Table G.1 in Appendix G). Just as being involved in this study and having the opportunity to share their stories was beneficial for my participants, it is my hope that this inquiry and collection of my participants' stories will be vicariously healing for others.

## Implications and Interventions for Practice

In my inquiry, I discovered that the learning and meaning-making process that followed the participants' events guided the decisions they made for future career and work paths, as well as life direction, purpose, and overall ontology. One of my key

findings indicated a substantial change in priorities for vocation by my participants after their events, and how some redefined the status quo notion of success. Specifically, living a more "authentic" life, or living more "true" to inner needs, values, and priorities, and being more present-moment focused were common themes. In this way, these types of events are major, if not primary catalysts for life trajectories, because what we do for work is how many in our society assign validation and meaning. Moreover, this may help explain why my participants' who experienced a profoundly negative sudden, life-altering event perceived positive benefits that brought wellbeing, thriving, and a meaningful life.

Most of the research on transformative learning has focused on interventions that foster transformative learning in higher education or professional business contexts (E. W. Taylor, 2007), which prioritizes andragogy over pedagogy. Beyond the implications I have discussed in relation to transformative adult learning and informal learning, I see implications and potential interventions from my findings for other areas of practice, and focus here on those in business and leadership, as well as positive psychology.

**Business and Leadership Practice**

It may be difficult to draw any firm conclusions from the interviewees' subjective perspectives about a true change in time orientation due to their sudden, life-altering events. Moreover, this phenomenon might be interpreted as a given for those who surmount adversity or are confronted with their mortality. Two of the participants alluded to this shift as possibly being age-related, rather than wisdom that evolved from their events. Nevertheless, the change in time orientation may explain the general lack of visioning I found. We might look at the process of visioning as a somewhat spiritual

process. In that case, we can see that the spirit or soul would not necessarily be altered by a life event, which both Henry and John affirmed by articulating that their "core" being had not changed. This may be of significance, but I would say it would be a difficult area to examine through inquiry. Possibly, the lack of creating a new vision had something to do with the fact that some of the interviewees were still immersed long-term in a complex process of redefining the Self, by choice. Furthermore, some of the participants were living their former vision at the time of our interview.

One implication for business this finding may raise is that a present-moment focus may not be compatible with the emphasis in our society and its institutions on achieving future goals. Thus, individuals who experience life-altering events may no longer "fit" in traditional organizational work settings, as several of my participants expressed. Somewhat related to a change in time orientation is the fact that both Kevin and Karen mentioned a shift in their work focus on process over task, or "the how" versus "the what." This type of focus is advantageous to improving business processes and could be utilized to advantage in the organizational setting.

According to Allison-Napolitano, adversity is common in our lives today, and life is "a series of disorienting dilemmas" (2014), which requires changing our behaviors, as well as our assumptions sometimes. She states it is essential to realize that growth depends on change. Her focus is on leadership: "Leaders have to help people carry on," and uses the concept of "mitigation," meaning to relieve, soften, and alleviate, in defining a required role for effective leadership. Allison-Napolitano notes that some people have a high tolerance for change and instability, and seem to have less attachment to the way things were in the past. This underlies my use of the construct, "acceptance" in my

model, of both changed external circumstances and the internal Self, which I saw as critical points in the metamorphic learning process. Allison-Napolitano priorities resilience and, thus, her construct of "adaptive action" follows, which does aptly convey the flexibility that my participants needed, to make changes in the face of sudden "disruption."

In fact, several of my participants' events spurred significant career changes, including a move away from the corporate work environment to what they considered more "meaningful" work that provided opportunities to express their found altruism. Several realized their life purpose as one of service to others, including Glenn, Jane, and Alice. Kevin discussed how he now prioritizes relationships in conducting business. If sudden, life-altering events are as common as my pilot findings indicated (see appendix G), these changes in attitude toward corporations and work focus carry potential implications for employers and leadership. Perhaps the well-known issue of turnover in the corporate world would not be so great if employees were given opportunities to collaborate in meaningful ways with one another and the communities in which they work, building and sustaining relationships to better the quality of life and work for the greater good.

I was particularly struck by the stories in common that involved job loss, and the suffering this caused. In fact, unemployment has been associated with suicide (Nordt, Warnke, Seifritz, & Kawohl, 2015). Employers, leadership, and assistance programs might be able to change these factors by doing better at supporting, mentoring, coaching, and/or guiding personnel through job loss, not only for humanistic reasons but, also, for the negative impacts on greater society. When people are dealing with basic safety and

physiological needs, it stands to reason that fear, worry, and panic create stress. Leadership could do better at assuring safety and faith (versus hope, which I view as a less concrete concept), through adhering to the values of transparency and acknowledgment, and by practicing active listening in hearing the stories of adversity.

**Potential interventions**. The reason we conduct research is to learn and transfer what is of relevant import into praxis. In the end, all interventions touch greater society. An intervention to assist those who have experienced a sudden, life-altering event might involve leadership (or counseling) making use of Maslow's hierarchy (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; 1943) as a tool to identify what motivates particular individuals, and then target available support to address those identified motivators. For example, in a situation involving job loss, the need for self-esteem, in addition to safety and psychological needs, may be particularly important. These are motivators that a simple questionnaire or survey instrument designed from Maslow's model would illustrate.

For example, Desautels (2015) defined a series of questions following this framework for educators to use in determining whether or not the psychological needs of students are being met in the classroom. Helping individuals who are facing a sudden life change make an effective transition based upon the needs they identify as being most important to them could potentially defray some of their stress. To this end, leadership could align appropriate resources and support, such as offering educational opportunities, making referrals to community and/or clinical support options, and/or working to retain individuals in another capacity.

My research actually showed that the individuals I studied who were once motivated by self-esteem experienced such significant paradigm shifts that they became

motivated by self-actualization and self-transcendence needs after their sudden, life-altering events. This paradigm shift was noted in many of the narratives, including Glen, John, Anthony, Joe, Claire, and Jane. For individuals like them, leadership and employers could utilize a similar intervention designed from Maslow's model (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; 1943) to help support them through the aftermath of a sudden, life-changing event, be it positive or negative.

Although my focus in this research inquiry was on the individual, one suggested intervention might transfer to the group level, in dealing with tragedies that communities experience together. Specifically, an effective intervention might involve leadership bringing individual epiphanies to light, gathering them together for synthesis, and creating a motivational impetus from which the group can learn and use to move forward to take positive action. In my view, this marks authentic, transformational leadership, led by the skilled change agent in working with a group to cohesively and collectively regenerate a redefined reality, just as my participants did individually. Yet another effective group intervention might involve storytelling. Shared stories help bond individuals together and bring forth wisdom for the collective good.

**Positive Psychology**

Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide a framework that classifies 24 character strengths under the six historically and culturally universal virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. They maintain that character strengths, as the building blocks of wellbeing, can change from life events, lifestyle change, and intervention. One intention with this inquiry was to examine whether or not sudden, life-altering events were perceived by those who reported this experience as,

overall, positive or negative events, which carries a host of implications for wellbeing and mental health.

In this inquiry, I affirmed that, as a benefit of redefining their Selves and their lives, the individuals I studied were able to express many found character strengths in the aftermath of their sudden, life-altering events. In coming to closure, these individuals were then "empowered," as Claire expressed so well, to perceive lifelong benefits such as strength, gratitude, a simpler, less stressful life, careers that aligned with their hearts, redefined notions of success, joy and happiness, and overall greater wellbeing. In fact, growth in the form of awakening to wisdom, especially self-wisdom and feelings of being a more authentic, "better" Self, was a significant resulting benefit for many of the participants. What is of most import is that the majority of the impacts my participants realized or perceived were considered *positive*. The implications of a more positive perspective for mental health are widely known today, and benefit greater society overall.

To elaborate, more positive attitudes seemed to have commenced with acceptance of their new situations for the participants who experienced negative events. I do not believe that these individuals were necessarily predisposed to look at life with a more optimistic viewpoint, as some research alludes to these days. For example, John stated that he used to be a "negative" person, and has to work hard "every day" to sustain a positive outlook for his wellbeing and health. Jane used to be an "out-of-control" person. Glenn, too, "used others" to get what he wanted. But these participants, as well as most of the others who experienced what they perceived was a negative event, ended up viewing their event as a "gift" that profoundly changed their lives for the better, which they expressed at the time of our interviews. Because these individuals are not

necessarily different from others in regard to possessing an inherent, more optimistic perspective, I can only surmise that following the metamorphic learning process may be an effective approach to accepting and making positive change for a better quality of life following a sudden, life-altering event. Specifically, the choice my participants made to confront and reflect on their events eventually led to their transformed, positive perspectives. Moreover, it was revealed that the learning and change process they went through positively informed subsequent learning events in their lives.

I personally have concern over the recent, "always be positive" movement, which has become apparent in some philosophical positions. It is not possible to always be positive and, in trying to be so, an individual has to essentially ignore or detach from any other emotions or feelings. Instead, I would encourage a culture where individuals can honestly and openly speak their voice and share their adversity, which can help to positively establish invaluable bonds between individuals. As technology more and more controls our relationships, communication, and our very lives, it is crucial that we work to sustain today's fragile connections with one another. Living and learning through sharing our stories of adversity is one such way, I hold. To this end, I maintain that our focus should be on positive action, but not in denying what happened or how an event made us feel. Being able to perceive a negative event as an opportunity for profound learning that can lead to positive outcomes lies behind what I view as a key preliminary finding from this inquiry, and is a gift of wisdom like none other. As I have already noted, I feel we can learn much from those who are able to see the good in the bad.

## Suggestions for Future Research

An exploratory inquiry is appropriate when few previous studies exist about a particular phenomenon. In conducting such a study, the researcher seeks patterns, commonalities, or theory that can then inform further research and eventually lead to testing for validity. My inquiry I described herein was exploratory, with the intent to discover if the learning process from a self-reported sudden, overnight learning event is a valid area of research. As such, the sample was small and, thus, not generalizable to a larger population. Indeed, my methodology prioritized qualitative data, which is subjective and discounted by scientific positivists. Nonetheless, the point of qualitative research is to focus on individual voices, which offer much for us to learn from. For the qualitative researcher, learning comes from the outliers and the exceptions, rather than from averages. I believe the stories that were shared herein provide evidence that *sudden*, life-altering events are distinct and important to study as central adult learning experiences.

I too have experienced profound events in my lifetime, as most of us have. For example, when I asked a husband to leave and lost a beloved dog within a few hours on the same day, I wanted to give up completing work on my PhD. Stuck in a rut of despair, I ignored my sudden realization, or self-wisdom, and allowed others to talk me out of following what I felt in my heart. Unlike myself, many of the individuals I studied seemed to be able to assimilate through reflective practice and make effective decisions about what actions to take that aligned with their hearts, relatively soon after their profound events. (This explains why it was not appropriate for me to conduct this inquiry using a phenomenological approach.)

Just what it is that enables individuals to go through this type of learning and change process would need to be studied further, I feel. Am I correct in theorizing that my participants' sudden, life-altering events served as change catalysts, but their sudden realizations, epiphanies, and/or "knowings" subsequent to their events enabled and drove what I have defined as the metamorphic learning process? More data is called for to investigate these preliminary results further.

To this end, if my exploratory research were to be continued, the next steps might include a larger grounded theory qualitative research effort to refine the preliminary theory of metamorphic learning I have presented herein. In particular, the relationship between the little epiphanies, sudden realizations, and/or "knowings" that followed the events my participants experienced, and seemingly guided the direction and content of their subsequent reflection, needs to be studied in greater detail.

One observation I had that surprised me was the remarkable lack of anger and discussion of fear from the participants who experienced what they perceived as a negative life-altering event. I feel that, along with acceptance of the situation and the Self, release of fear may be a critical turning point, or shift, which is something I failed to explore theoretically, although several participants voiced that their event brought forth the positive strengths of courage and confidence.

Future qualitative research could be conducted by focusing on the adult learning process from one type of sudden, life-altering event, such as job loss, cancer diagnosis, or a sudden confrontation with mortality. Such focused studies have been widely conducted in the realms of clinical and positive psychology but, again, they have not been widely studied in the adult learning context.

I might note that the extended, holistic grounded theory research process I followed was time-consuming and, to be honest, initially overwhelming. I learned that following the qualitative research path required nearly total immersion for an extended length of time to focus on effectively assimilating, organizing, prioritizing, and analyzing the vast quantity of data I collected. I adapted the grounded theory method as conceptualized by Charmaz (2007; 2002, 2009) to gather more data through extensive, in-depth interviewing, rather than to narrow my focus as a theory began to emerge. I chose this strategy to increase my coverage of potential theoretical paths, enhance credibility, and ultimately better my understanding for this exploratory effort, as well as for the fact that I wanted to give my participants sufficient time to speak their stories. Now that I have defined a preliminary theory, such coverage would not need to be so extensive, although I do feel that the chance of serendipitous and potentially important findings is greater with more data collection, rather than less. This approach would most likely not be feasible with a larger sample, however. Additionally, I learned that I had too many research questions, and that focusing on one of the three sub-questions might have been more reasonable for this preliminary study. Specifically, my subsidiary questions 2 and 3 were intertwined with one another, and it was somewhat difficult to distinctly organize and analyze the data I collected between these two paths of inquiry.

Another next step, either after further qualitative data collection or in lieu of, might be to create a survey instrument to measure the validity of my preliminary theory of metamorphic learning with a larger sample. If my theory shows any credence with such an assessment, a test intervention could then be designed to assist individuals who experience a negative sudden, life-changing event identify a motivating or directional,

self-affirming, and/or optimistic sudden realization so they can then move forward through the learning and recovery process toward metamorphosis. Alternatively, an intervention that leads those having difficulty assimilating or accepting a difficult event to define a personally meaningful metaphor or symbol might be effective. Metaphors and symbols serve as mental "shortcuts" that may help individuals change their perceptions and, thus, perspectives, in a positive way, potentially leading them through a "stuck" or denial phase more quickly, especially if combined with meditative or self-reflective practice. Moreover, this symbolic shortcut can be easily accessed by the mind, as a helpful reflexive tool for difficult future moments.

For the individuals I interviewed, their sudden, life-altering event seemed to elicit signature strengths that might otherwise have lain dormant, unexpressed. For instance, Mark mentioned how his event brought out the strength of courage. Likewise, several of the participants mentioned the strength of confidence that their events brought to them. Other strengths I saw in the narratives were self-efficacy, leadership, honesty, love, gratitude, altruism, spirituality, self-regulation, hope, and determination. Offering individuals who have gone through sudden, life-altering events the Values in Action (VIA) survey instrument (Anonymous, 2011a) would be an interesting angle for future research, which could lead to helpful interventions, as well.

Another potential area for future study I have already mentioned but repeat here is that one significant event may build character strengths and/or wisdom, which better prepares and guides a person through future profound events. This discovery is similar to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2001), which purports that positive emotions increase attention and cognition, and which, in turn, build personal resources—ranging

from the physical and intellectual, to the social and psychological. According to this positive psychologist, the phenomenon initiates "upward spirals" that increase emotional wellbeing. I see a potential related theory in regard to significant events building up resources that positively assist individuals in learning and changing from subsequent profound events.

Lastly, many of the participants mentioned the constructs of simplicity, reconstructing their lives to hold less stress, finding "meaningful" work, and changing how they defined success in life. It would be particularly interesting to study redefined definitions of success, since our society emphasizes this construct so strongly. Critical theory methodology (Brookfield, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) might be appropriate for this suggestion.

## Close

In close, I have completed my exploratory quest to examine the learning process for a few adults who reported having experienced a sudden, life-altering event, and to create preliminary grounded theory. The very word, "preliminary" is significant because, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintained, grounded theory is never complete, even when published. Furthermore, we cannot make conclusions from the results of an exploratory inquiry. Rather, I strove to establish that this is a valid area of consideration within the realm of adult learning, in relation to transformative learning theory.

For my participants, their lives were more than *disrupted* unexpectedly; they were entirely changed, and their stories may help us better understand how to successfully navigate a sudden, life-altering event. I do feel that some of my findings have particular import and applicability to those facing adversity. First, there was a profound, brief,

sudden realization shortly after the event, which seemed to serve as an impetus for motivating needed changes and guiding the ensuing reflection to begin the shift in perspectives. This insignificantly perceived, little epiphany just may lie behind the ability to move forward along a path to metamorphosis, whereas many others instead tend to remain "stuck" or, like myself, follow what others want. Secondly, more positive attitudes seemed to have commenced with acceptance of their new situations for the participants who experienced negative events. Following the metamorphic learning process may be an effective approach to accepting and making positive change for a better quality of life.

After living with the profound stories my participants shared with me so intimately, for so long of a time while I completed my research, I personally have learned and changed myself during this inquiry. Now, when adversity surprises me in my life, I do follow the metamorphic learning process by first listening for the little sudden realization that follows the event, and then move on from there to honestly confront the situation with reflective practice.

Epitaph

**The Journey**

We all travel to the same destination in this physical life.
For some, the journey is fleeting.
For others, it seems all too long.

Some trod paths strewn with sticks and stones.
Others ride a painted pony through fields of flowers.
A few soar above us all.

Some are swallowed up in the ocean.
Others sail calm seas, taking respite on a deserted island to ride out the occasional tempest.
A few glide in tandem, creating music with another soul.

Most of us stop to pick up treasures along our paths.
Sometimes we share, and sometimes we gift.
Other times, we just hold our treasures close for ourselves.

Some live in the past.
Others speed toward the future.
A few see through the illusions to savor the here and now.

Some cry tears of struggle.
Others cry over lessons learned.
A few cry tears of gratitude.

Some learn and grow.
Others just stay the same.
A few make a difference.

Some live.
Others never really do.
As we all travel to the same destination in this physical life.

~Joan (Ferrell) San-Claire, 2015

Appendix A. Research Plan

Table A.1. Research Planning Matrix

| **Research Questions** | **Why do I need to know this?** | **What kind of data will answer the questions?** | **Data Collection Methods** | **Data Analysis Methods** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What was the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event? | To discover the adult learning process and outcomes with sudden, life-altering events, and to generate theory, thus contributing to knowledge | Qualitative data: interviews and correspondence with adults who perceive that they have experienced a sudden, life-altering learning event | Solicit participants via conditional survey sampling technique and interview candidates who meet the criteria and volunteer to participate | Grounded theory |
| What were the events experienced by the participants, and how do they relate with Mezirow's (2009) definition of a transformative learning event? | To evaluate the data according to the framework of transformative adult learning theory | Qualitative data: interviews and correspondence with adults who perceive that they have experienced a sudden, life-altering learning event | Solicit participants via conditional survey sampling technique and interview candidates who meet the criteria and volunteer to participate | Grounded theory |
| Do adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall learning outcomes of the event to be positive or negative, and why? | To learn if individuals who report a sudden, life-altering event consider the overall outcomes to be positive or negative | Quantitative data: survey data. Reinforced with qualitative data: interviews and correspondence with adults who perceive that they have experienced a sudden, life-altering learning event | Solicit participants via conditional survey sampling technique and interview candidates who meet the criteria and volunteer to participate | Descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS and grounded theory |

| **Research Questions** | **Why do I need to know this?** | **What kind of data will answer the questions?** | **Data Collection Methods** | **Data Analysis Methods** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| What are the impacts of this type of adult learning event? | To better understand the outcomes for the individual who reports having had a sudden, life-altering event, and how these outcomes might be realized by others | Qualitative data: interviews and correspondence with adults who perceive they experienced a sudden, life-altering learning event | Solicit participants via conditional survey sampling technique and interview candidates who meet the criteria and volunteer to participate | General qualitative |

# Appendix B. IRB Approval


**Main Campus Institutional Review Board**
**Human Research Protections Office**
**MSC08 4560**
**1 University of New Mexico~Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001**
**http://hsc.unm.edu/som/research/HRRC/**

08-Nov-2011

Responsible Faculty: Patsy Boverie
Investigator: Joan Ferrell
Dept/College: Educ Leadership Orgn Learning ELOL

***SUBJECT: IRB Approval of Research - Modification***
***Protocol #: 11-460***
***Project Title: Pilot Study of Adult Learning from Sudden Change***
***Type of Review: Expedited Review***
***Approval Date: 08-Nov-2011***
***Expiration Date: 07-Nov-2012***

The Main Campus Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved the above referenced protocol. It has been approved based on the review of the following:

1. Expedited Review Study Application (Attachment 8 revised) submitted 11/07/2011;
2. Investigator's Protocol submitted 09/23/2011;
3. UNM Consent Form (survey cover letter) version 09/22/2011;
4. UNM Verbal Consent Script (interviews) version 09/22/2011;
5. Study Instruments: Participant Selection Survey created in Opinio, Interview Questions - both submitted 09/23/2011.

Consent Decision:
Signature waived; requires written statement about research
HIPAA Authorization Addendum not applicable

If a consent is required, we have attached a date stamped consent that must be used for consenting participants during the above noted approval period.

If HIPAA authorization is required, the HIPAA authorization version noted above should be signed in conjunction with the consent form.

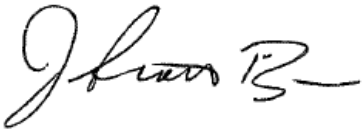
As the principal investigator of this study, you assume the following responsibilities:

- CONSENT: To ensure that ethical and legal informed consent has been obtained from all research participants.
- RENEWAL: To submit a progress report to the IRB at least 30 days prior to the end of the approval period in order for this study to be considered for continuation.
- ADVERSE EVENTS: To report any adverse events or reactions to the IRB immediately.
- MODIFICATIONS: To submit any changes to the protocol, such as procedures, consent/assent forms, addition of subjects, or study design to the IRB as an Amendment for review and approval.

- COMPLETION: To close your study when the study is concluded and all data has been de-identified (with no link to identifiers) by submiting a Closure Report.

Please reference the protocol number and study title in all documents and correspondence related to this protocol.

Sincerely,



J. Scott Tonigan, PhD
Chair
Main Campus IRB

* Under the provisions of this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (FWA00004690), the Main Campus IRB has determined that this proposal provides adequate safeguards for protecting the rights and welfare of the subjects involved in the study and is in compliance with HHS Regulations (45 CFR 46).

Appendix C. Participant Selection Survey

**Intro**

Hello. I am a PhD student with the University of New Mexico, and am conducting a research study on adults for my dissertation effort. The purpose of the study is to better understand the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. The following anonymous survey is designed to learn whether or not adults in the U.S. have experienced such an event. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. The survey is brief, and should only take 5 to 15 minutes to complete. By completing the survey, you are agreeing to participate in the study. Your participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any time by exiting the survey. Please note that results of this anonymous survey will be reported in my dissertation, and may be used for publication.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me, Joan Ferrell, at (505) 205-2960. Alternatively, you may contact my dissertation chair and responsible faculty member, Dr. Patricia Boverie, at (505) 277-2804. If you have questions regarding your legal rights as a research subject, you may call the UNM Human Research Protections Office at (505) 272-1129.

Thank you for your time.

Question 1

1. I understand that my participation in this survey is voluntary, and I consent to participate.

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree [If Disagree is selected, the survey jumps to the Close]

---------- page break ----------

Question 2

2. I feel that I have experienced a sudden, life-changing event. Specifically, I changed my perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, priorities in life, and/or behaviors shortly after and because of experiencing this event.

☐ Agree
☐ Disagree [If Disagree is selected, the survey jumps to the Close]

---------- page break ----------

Question 3

3. I feel that my life-changing event was, overall, a positive event, in that it resulted in positive, long-term outcomes.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | | | | | | Strongly agree |

---------- page break ----------

Question 4

4. I feel that my life-changing event was, overall, a negative event, in that it resulted in negative, long-term outcomes.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly disagree | | | | | | Strongly agree |

---------- page break ----------

Question 5

5. Demographics

☐ Female
☐ Male

---------- page break ----------

Question 6

6. Age range when you experienced this sudden, life-changing event:

- ☐ 13-19
- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60 plus

---------- page break ----------

Question 7

7. How long ago did you experience this sudden, life-changing event?

- ☐ Within the past year
- ☐ 2 to 5 years ago
- ☐ 5 to 15 years ago
- ☐ Over 15 years ago

---------- page break ----------

Question 8

8. Request for Interview: As the sole researcher for this study, I am interested in conducting interviews with survey respondents who report having experienced a sudden, life-changing event. The purpose of the study is to better understand the learning process for adults who report this experience. You are being asked to participate in this study because you met the selection criteria. Would you be interested and willing to share your experience with me?

Your participation in this study will involve one to two informal telephone interviews scheduled at your convenience, from 1 to 1½ hour each. I will need to tape record our interviews to assist in transcribing our conversations. I may ask additional related follow-up questions, and will need your review and verification that I have recorded your

story accurately. Thus, the total time commitment for your involvement in this study is from 2 to 5 hours. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate, or to withdraw at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with this study. The study includes questions such as:

1. Please tell me more about the life-changing event you experienced (for example, when did it occur, how old were you, etc.)
2. Please tell me more about the learning process you experienced from this event.

You may refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There are no known risks or costs associated with your participation in this study, but please note that I will be asking you to remember and discuss an event in your life that may cause you to feel some stressful emotions and feelings. If the feelings and memories are very stressful for you, you may call me at any time, and I will be happy to refer you to a caring, certified professional counselor. Please also note that some participants may find intrinsic reward from participating in this study, in coming to better know themselves through reflection and discussion with me about aspects of their life. You will not be compensated monetarily for your participation.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will take every precaution and measure to protect the security of your personal information, and to maintain your anonymity. In fact, I will not ask for your personal identification. Instead, I will immediately assign and refer to you thereafter by a pseudonym. All voice recordings will only be kept until I transcribe them. All transcripts, computer files, emails, and other research documents will be kept for 2 to 5 years, or until study completion, at which time I will destroy them.

The findings from this project will provide information on the learning process for adults such as you who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. This is a study, but it will inform my larger dissertation effort. I may use the data I collect from you for this larger dissertation effort, which will follow this study.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me, Joan Ferrell, at (505) 205-2960. Alternatively, you may contact my dissertation chair and responsible faculty member, Dr. Patricia Boverie, at (505) 277-2804. If you have questions regarding your legal rights as a research subject, you may call the UNM Human Research Protections Office at (505) 272-1129.

By checking agree here in this survey, you will be agreeing to voluntarily participate in the above described research study.

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree [If Disagree is selected, the survey jumps to the Close]

---------- page break ----------

Question 9

9. Thank you for your willingness to share your experience with me. My name is Joan Ferrell, and I will contact you within the next few weeks to schedule a telephone interview at your convenience. Please provide me with your first name only and an e-mail address and/or your phone number where I can best reach you. You may also provide me with a best time to call. **Please do not give me your last name.** Thank you.

Your first name and email address and/or phone number with area code

---------- page break ----------

**Close**

Please freely share this survey with any adult you know who may wish to participate:

Tell a friend [by pressing this link, someone can send an email with the survey link, which is https://esurvey6.unm.edu/opinio/s?s=40203]

---------- page break ----------

The end. Thank you for your time.

# Appendix D. Verbal Consent Form[12]

**University of New Mexico**

**Verbal Informed Consent Interview Script**

Pilot Study of Adult Learning from Sudden Change

My name is Joan D. Ferrell, and I am a doctoral student from the Organizational Learning & Instructional Technology program within the College of Education. As the Principal Investigator, I, along with Responsible Faculty Member, Dr. Patricia Boverie, am conducting a research study. The purpose of the study is to better understand the learning process for adults who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. You are being asked to participate in this study because you met the selection criteria in the survey you completed and expressed interest in sharing your story.

Your participation in this study will involve one to two informal telephone interviews scheduled at your convenience, from 1 to 1½ hour each. I will need to tape record our interviews to assist in transcribing our conversations. I may ask additional, related, follow-up questions, and will need your review and verification that I have recorded your story accurately. Thus, I estimate that the total time commitment for your involvement in this study is from 2 to 5 hours.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate, or to withdraw at any time. There are no names or identifying information associated with this study. In fact, I will assign you a pseudo name with which to refer to you hereafter, including in any reporting. The study includes questions such as:

1. Please tell me more about the life-changing event you experienced (for example, when did it occur, how old were you, etc.).
2. Please tell me more about the learning process you experienced from this event?
3. What did you learn (for example, outcomes were self-knowledge, a changed self-identity, a desire to generate social change, wisdom, hardiness, resilience, maturity, confidence, or happiness, etc.), and how specifically did you learn it (i.e., through self-reflection, prayer, meditation)?
4. Please describe whether or not your learning from this experience was immediate, or did it evolve over a period of time?

You may refuse to answer any of the questions at any time. There may or may not be any direct benefit to participants in this study, and you will not be compensated monetarily for your participation. Some participants my find intrinsic reward from participating, in coming to better know themselves through reflection and discussion with me about aspects of their life. There are no known risks or costs associated with your participation in this study, but please note that I will be asking you to remember and discuss an event in your life that may cause you to feel some stressful emotions. If the feelings and memories are very stressful for you, you may call me at any time, and I will be happy to refer you to a caring, certified professional counselor.



12 Note that I had a name change during the progress of this study from Joan D. Ferrell to Joan D. San-Claire, which was approved in an IRB Mod and changed when reading the consent.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will take every precaution and measure to protect the security of your contact and personal information, and to maintain your anonymity. All voice recordings will only be kept until I transcribe them, and no one else will have access to these transcripts. All transcripts, computer files, emails, and analysis documents will be kept for 2 to 5 years in my home office, or until study completion, at which time I will destroy them.

The findings from this project will provide information on the learning process for adults such as you who report having experienced a sudden, life-altering event. This is a pilot study, but it will inform my larger dissertation effort. I may use the data I collect from you for this larger dissertation effort, which will follow this pilot study. Please note that I retain the right to end your participation in this study if I determine that you no longer qualify to take part, or if it is in your best interest to stop your participation.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research project at any time, please feel free to call me, Joan Ferrell, at (505) 205-2960. Alternatively, you may contact my dissertation chair and responsible faculty member, Dr. Patricia Boverie, at (505) 277-2804. If you have questions regarding your legal rights as a research subject, you may call the UNM Human Research Protections Office at (505) 272-1129.

You now need to make a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Do you understand the consent information I have relayed to you? Do you have any questions at this time? Do you agree to participate in the research study I have described to you? Thank you.

## Appendix E. List of Interview Questions

I will ask the following "grand tour" questions of every interview participant:

1. Please tell me more about the life-changing event you experienced (for example, when did it occur, how old were you, etc.).
2. Please tell me more about the learning process you experienced from this event?

My remaining questions may be similar to some of the following:

3. How did you feel at the time this event was happening (i.e., terrified, not fair, etc.)?
4. Would you want to return to life before this event or do you feel you are better off (in terms of emotional, mental, physical health)?
5. Please tell me more about whether or not you feel others have to experience a life-changing event to learn what you did.
6. What were your ultimate priorities for life before the event and how do they differ now, if at all?
7. How do you think about this event today?
8. How do you talk about this event now and with whom do you talk about it with?
9. Please tell me more about whether or not you feel more connected with other humans and/or the environment after having experienced this change? If so, how?
10. In terms of education, please tell me more about this experience's importance, in comparison to the formal education and other learning and developmental experiences you've had.
11. What constraints and barriers did you have to overcome, and how did you do so?
12. Who helped, supported, and/or guided you during this event, and how did they do so?

13. What changes did you make in your life after the event, and why?
14. How did your relations change with others after?
15. What did you learn (for example, outcomes were self-knowledge, a changed self-identity, a desire to generate social change, wisdom, hardiness, resilience, maturity, confidence, or happiness, etc.), and how specifically did you learn it (i.e., through self-reflection, prayer, meditation)?
16. Please describe whether or not your learning from this experience was immediate, or did it evolve over a period of time?
17. If you have gone through therapy, did you go through therapy because of this event (i.e., after the event) and, if so, for how long (or is it continuing today)? Has it helped or was it mainly you helping yourself?
18. Would you say your reflection after the event was self-reflection or critical reflection (a pro and con type of assessment of yourself and/or of society, etc.), or both? If both, which did you do more of?
19. Would you say that you came to realize your life purpose because of this event and, if so, was it immediately or some time afterward?
20. Would you say that you live in the moment now or do you think about the future?
21. If you think about the future, did you create a new "vision" for the remainder of your life with a new plan of action that did not necessarily involve achieving that vision, because the process/journey is now more important to you?
22. What do you feel are your signature strengths? Were these strengths there before the event?

23. What one metaphor and/or symbol in particular would you choose to describe this event and your subsequent changes (in beliefs, perceptions, behaviors, etc.) shortly afterward?
24. Self-efficacy is defined as: the belief that one is capable of performing in a certain manner to attain goals as a person's belief about their capabilities to perform, which exercise influence over events that affect their lives. It is a belief that one has the capabilities to carry out the courses of actions that are required to manage life's situations. Does this term, self-efficacy, describe a new strength you realized as an outcome or through experiencing this event that was not there previously and, if so, how?
25. Please describe whether or not you view your learning through this experience as healing and/or wisdom.

Appendix F: Coding Taxonomy

Table F.1
*Coding Taxonomy Example*

| Participant A | Participant B | Participant C |
|---|---|---|
| **A** | **Theme or Subtheme** | |
| A1 | | |
| A2 | | |
| A3 | | |
| A4 | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Z** | **Findings** | |
| **Z1** | | |
| Z2 | | |

Appendix G: Pilot Study Data Analysis

Table G.1
*Individuals who Reported a Sudden Life-Altering Event (SLAE)*

| | | Frequency | % | Valid % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 Agree | 121 | 59.0 | 65.1 |
| | 2 Disagree | 65 | 31.7 | 34.9 |
| | Total | 186 | 90.7 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 0 | 19 | 9.3 | |
| Total | | 205 | 100.0 | |

Table G.2
*Individuals Reporting an SLAE who Feel Positive*

| | | Frequency | % | Valid % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 Strongly disagree | 5 | 2.4 | 4.3 |
| | 2 Disagree | 6 | 2.9 | 5.1 |
| | 3 Slightly disagree | 7 | 3.4 | 6.0 |
| | 4 Neither agree nor disagree | 13 | 6.3 | 11.1 |
| | 5 Slightly agree | 15 | 7.3 | 12.8 |
| | 6 Agree | 32 | 15.6 | 27.4 |
| | 7 Strongly agree | 39 | 19.0 | 33.3 |
| | Total | 117 | 57.1 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 0 | 88 | 42.9 | |
| Total | | 205 | 100.0 | |

Figure G.1
*Individuals Reporting an SLAE who Feel Positive*

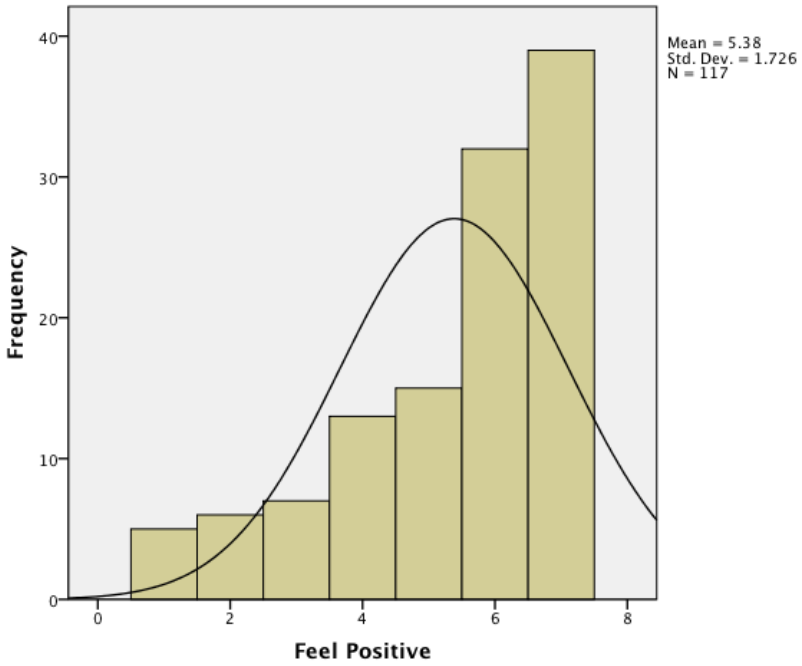



Figure G.2
*Individuals Reporting an SLAE who Feel Negative*

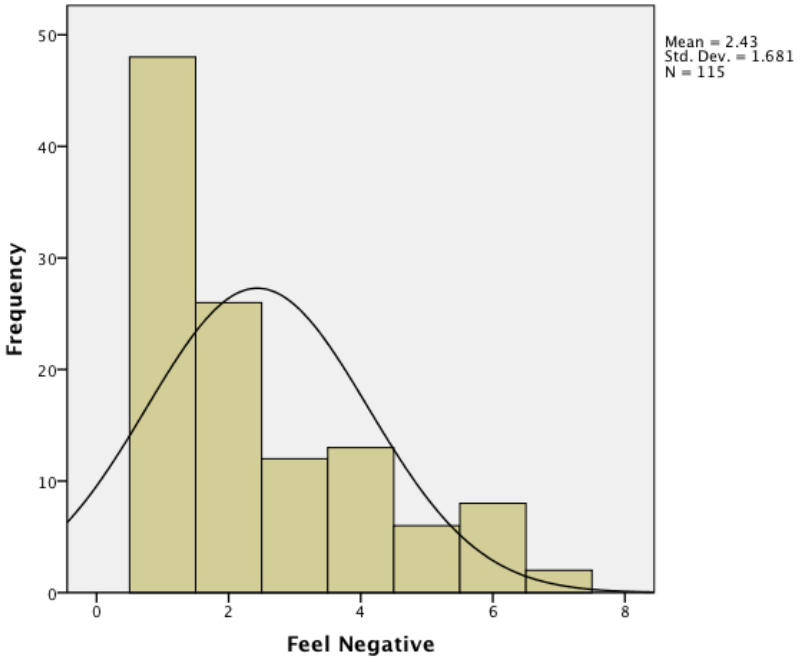


Table G.3
*Individuals Reporting an SLAE who Feel Negative*

| | | Frequency | % | Valid % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 Strongly disagree | 48 | 23.4 | 41.7 |
| | 2 Disagree | 26 | 12.7 | 22.6 |
| | 3 Slightly disagree | 12 | 5.9 | 10.4 |
| | 4 Neither agree nor disagree | 13 | 6.3 | 11.3 |
| | 5 Slightly agree | 6 | 2.9 | 5.2 |
| | 6 Agree | 8 | 3.9 | 7.0 |
| | 7 Strongly agree | 2 | 1.0 | 1.7 |
| | Total | 115 | 56.1 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 0 | 90 | 43.9 | |
| Total | | 205 | 100.0 | |

Figure G.3
*Gender of Individuals Reporting an SLAE*

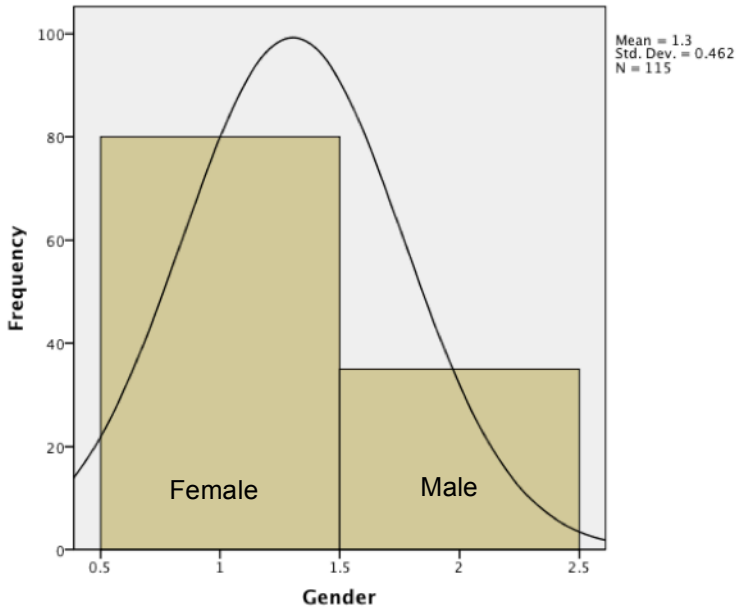


Table G.4
*Age Range of Individuals at Time of SLAE*

| | Age Range | Frequency | % | Valid % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 13-19 | 8 | 3.9 | 7.1 |
| | 2 20-29 | 14 | 6.8 | 12.5 |
| | 3 30-39 | 25 | 12.2 | 22.3 |
| | 4 40-49 | 28 | 13.7 | 25.0 |
| | 5 50-59 | 24 | 11.7 | 21.4 |
| | 6 60 plus | 13 | 6.3 | 11.6 |
| | Total | 112 | 54.6 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 0 | 93 | 45.4 | |
| Total | | 205 | 100.0 | |

Table G.5
*How Long Ago Individuals Experienced the SLAE*

| | Timeframe | Frequency | % | Valid % |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 Within the past year | 13 | 6.3 | 11.6 |
| | 2 2 to 5 years ago | 36 | 17.6 | 32.1 |
| | 3 5 to 15 years ago | 36 | 17.6 | 32.1 |
| | 4 Over 15 years ago | 27 | 13.2 | 24.1 |
| | Total | 112 | 54.6 | 100.0 |
| Missing | 0 | 93 | 45.4 | |
| Total | | 205 | 100.0 | |

Table G.6
*Summary Descriptive Statistics for SLAE*

| | N | Range | Min | Max | *M* | SD | Skewness | SE | Kurtosis | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Report SLAE | 186 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1.35 | .478 | .637 | .178 | -1.612 | .355 |
| Feel Positive | 117 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 5.38 | 1.726 | -1.044 | .224 | .171 | .444 |
| Feel Negative | 115 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 2.43 | 1.681 | 1.056 | .226 | .049 | .447 |
| Age Range SLAE | 112 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 3.76 | 1.416 | -.202 | .228 | -.738 | .453 |
| How long ago experienced | 112 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 2.69 | .968 | -.121 | .228 | -.985 | .453 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 112 | | | | | | | | | |

Table G.7
*Demographics of Pilot Study Interviewees*

| Category and Class | Count |
|---|---|
| Ethnicity | |
| Caucasian | 4 |
| Jewish | 1 |
| Age at time of interview | |
| 30-39 | 1 |
| 40-49 | 1 |
| 50-59 | 1 |
| 60+ | 2 |
| Age at time of primary event | |
| 10-20 | 2 |
| 30-40 | 3 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 2 |
| Gay Male | 1 |
| Female | 2 |
| Education | |
| 3 yrs college | 1 |
| Bachelor's degree | 1 |
| Post-graduate | 2 |
| PhD | 1 |
| Born and Raised | |
| Midwest | 1 |
| Eastern U.S. | 2 |
| Southwest | 2 |
| Currently living | |
| North Carolina | 1 |
| New Mexico | 4 |
| Occupation | |
| Retired minister | 1 |
| University dept. administrator | 1 |
| Academia | 2 |
| Retail/church assistant | 1 |
| Marital Status | |
| Married | |
| Divorced | 1 |
| Single in committed relationship | 1 |

Appendix H: Dissertation Timeline

**Fall 2011 to July 2012: IRB-Approved Pilot Study:**

August 15, 2011: Pilot Study Proposal submitted to Chair, Dr. P. Boverie

August 29, 2011: Pilot Study Survey created in Opinio

September 23, 2011: Investigator's Protocol, etc. submitted to IRB.

**November 8, 2011: IRB Approval of Research** for: "Pilot Study of Adult Learning from Sudden Change" (includes approval of participant selection for dissertation effort), Protocol #: 11-460

November 10, 2011: Pilot Study Survey opened

November, 2011 to July 2012: Participant Interviews and Analysis

December 2011: Dissertation committee formed

May 2012: Dissertation Proposal to Chair, Dr. P. Boverie

July 18, 2012: Proposed

August 2012: IRB Amendment Submission for Protocol #: 11-460

September 2012 through August 2014: Interviews, analysis

September 2014 through March 2015: Writing and editing

October 7, 2014: Closed IRB Study 11-460

**March 30, 2015: Defended**

April 2015: Finalized manuscript

May 2015: Graduate

# Appendix I: IRB Closure

UNM | Office of the Institutional Review Board

| | |
|---|---|
| DATE: | 10/13/14 |
| REFERENCE #: | 11-460 |
| PROJECT TITLE: | Study of Adult Learning From Sudden Change |
| PI OF RECORD: | Patricia Boverie |
| STUDENT INVESTIGATOR: | Joan San-Claire |
| SUBMISSION TYPE: | Closure |
| BOARD DECISION: | PROJECT CLOSED |
| EFFECTIVE DATE: | 10/07/14 |
| DOCUMENTS: | 11-460 Boverie (Ferrell) UNM Verbal Consent Script (Interviews) version 09222011<br>11-460 Closure Application<br>11-460 Mods. Approval<br>11-460 Protocol Guidelines Mod 08-11-13 |

The IRB closed the project effective 10/07/14. This action was taken because:

- The project is permanently closed to enrollment.
- All participants have completed all project-related interactions/interventions.
- Collection of private identifiable information is completed.
- Analysis of private identifiable information is completed.

Sincerely,

J. Scott Tonigan, PhD
*IRB Chair*

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Appendix J: Interviewed Participants' Stories (edited from their words) [13]

**Glenn's Story**

It was 1947, and Glenn was 16, enjoying a warm, September day with his friends and his buddy's car in the sand hills outside of town. The buddy with the car also had a 22 pistol. While the others trailed off on foot over the hills, Glenn and his buddy took turns with the pistol, firing away at weeds, trash, and whatever else they could find. After completely emptying the pistol, they put it back in its scabbard and shut it away in the glove compartment of the car. While his buddy headed off elsewhere, Glenn trotted over a sand hill or two, looking around for his other friends. Not finding anyone, he headed back toward the car, when he saw two pretty girls approaching. Glenn waved to them, and they all met up in the car. Taking the pistol out to show off to the girls, Glenn put it up to his head and pulled the trigger with his thumb on the hammer so it couldn't hit all the way. Three times he pulled the trigger, and it seemed to him as though he let the hammer hit harder each time. By then, the girls were hysterical, so Glenn decided to show them that the gun chamber was empty. But when he broke open the gun, it *wasn't* empty–it was *full* of bullets. Apparently, Glenn's buddy must have come back in the short time while he'd gone over the hill and reloaded it: "I don't know how he had had time to do that and then be completely out of sight . . . I was absolutely *shocked* when I saw those bullets fall out of the chamber."

[13] All pilot study participants were assigned a pseudonym.

**Alice's Story**

Alice was just 11 when she and her siblings came home from school one day to find their mother "just screaming, screaming, screaming, pushing people away, and running around in the front yard." The family doctor showed up and, then, the "paddy wagon" came, and it was "just, *just* devastating." Those were the days when people didn't talk about mental illness, so it was a "big, big secret." She recalled, "It was sort of like I had a private life, which was hell, and a public life, which was pretend." Initially, Alice blamed her dad because she often overheard them arguing in the kitchen: "He's driving her crazy! That's all there is to it!" There were times when her dad would pull out this belt and beat Alice up, for things that she didn't feel were wrong. One day, Alice picked up the kitchen chair and just *heaved* it at her dad, and he backed off. That event ended the cycle of feeling intimidated and getting hurt from physical abuse. It was many years later, in 1988, when Alice read in the newspaper about the Amish study,[14] which was the first study about mental illness that she was aware of, and which indicated that mental illness was a family predisposition. This new knowledge turned Alice's world upside down, in realizing that her mother's condition *wasn't* caused by her dad. Shortly after that, she found out about NAMI.[15] Alice went to one of their meetings and, sitting there with tears streaming down her face, she recognized, "Oh, my gosh, this is where I belong; this is *home*."

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[14] Pardes, Herbert, Kaufmann, Charles A., Pincus, Harold A., West, Anne (1989). Genetics and psychiatry: Past discoveries, current dilemmas, and future directions. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 146(4), 435-443.

[15] The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is "the nation's largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness." (http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=About_NAMI accessed September 11, 2014).

**Anthony's Story**

A bright, ambitious young man with many hopes and dreams for his future, Anthony was just starting the second semester of a PhD program in another state. He was at his home-away-from-home when he got a phone call about his younger brother being ill and that he was in the hospital. Throughout the day, Anthony received regular updates from his mom. That evening, he had just come in from a run when an aunt called and told him he needed to come home. Dazed and numb, Anthony threw together an overnight bag and was on his way driving home when they called him again, to tell him it was too late. His brother was just 24 when he suddenly died from a blood clot. For an entire month after his brother was gone, Anthony said he "was numb to everything, and really didn't know what to think." He strove to be strong for his family, to not let his condition show. As the oldest son, he felt as if he had to become "the man, the adult," for his entire family. Anthony recalled, "It was awful. And, in so many ways, I felt like I was experiencing an out-of-body experience, 'cuz I just . . . couldn't believe that it was happening, and it was just so much."

**Becky's Story**

Raised in a very sheltered, conservative, and fundamentalist Christian household, Becky knew her mother's plan for her was, "Go to Bible College, meet somebody, ah, maybe a pastor, get married, have a dozen kids, or whatever." So Becky went to Bible College, only to find that people were "very strange, very repressed." She dropped out and stayed home for a year, trying to figure out what she was going to do. After attending a state university for the next three years, Becky remained "at a crossroads," still unsure of what to do with her life. In college since she was 18, she was tired of it, and decided that she wasn't going back. Becky had written some poetry, heard about a writer's conference, applied, and was accepted. During the conference, a man in a straw hat sat next to her a few times. One summer day, this "interesting character" approached her and invited her go to a neighboring town with some others for the day. Wearing a homemade dress with bare feet, 24-year-old Becky had met her future husband: "It was as if a lightning bolt had struck." Having come from a family of "introverts, who really didn't know how to get on in the world," and who "always escaped to their separate corners at home," Becky knew she was a very different, naïve person—a *child*, in a lot of ways: "My mother never taught me *simple* things, like how to take care of your *hair*." This man and his family were almost the complete opposite of that. Becky and the interesting character moved in together, and that's when her education as someone who could go out in the world and be successful and know how to negotiate began. This man "took this kid that didn't know *anything*, and taught her some social skills, how to get along in the world." Becky stated, "Basically, it was a transformation of *everything* for *me*, that moment, in which I had met my future husband."

**Claire's Story**

A dog she named "Shadrach" completely turned Claire's life "180-degrees around." In November of 1999, when a cousin she was very close to was murdered, her large family all came together from across the U.S. to hold a huge funeral. Everyone knew that Claire had lost her Golden Retriever back in January that same year. Claire had also lost her father that same, rough year. As family members were gathering together for the funeral and attending events, everyone noticed that Claire would spend more time with any dog that was around than she did with the family. This was her way of dealing with grief, because animals had always brought her "a kind of peace and steadiness." One day her aunt mentioned, "You know, your cousin has a Neo, a blue Mastiff." All Claire heard was "blue" and "Mastiff," and she said, "I'm interested." When Claire went to pick up the abused and neglected dog her cousin had rescued and take him home, she saw that he was in very bad shape. As some time went by, the dog did not flourish with her love and attention, supplemented with a lot of conventional veterinary care. Claire ended up walking away from the traditional, "status quo," Western medical paradigm, and went full force into holistic, naturopathic[16] care for both humans and animals. "This dog gave me back my dream," Claire stated.

[16] "Naturopathic medicine is a distinct primary health care profession, emphasizing prevention, treatment, and optimal health through the use of therapeutic methods and substances that encourage individuals' inherent self-healing process. The practice of naturopathic medicine includes modern and traditional, scientific, and empirical methods." American Association of Naturopathic Physicians. http://www.naturopathic.org/content.asp?contentid=59, accessed August 14, 2014.

**Henry's Story**

Henry had returned to school for his PhD and was "on a very *fast*-paced track to finish so that he could get on with his life." As a person who tends to be very disciplined, he was "very *focused*." He had just quit his job to focus on his dissertation, which was about how trust affected the workplace, and he was measuring how trust is built and broken. Consequently, Henry had all these books on trust in his home office. Meanwhile, Henry's partner left on an out-of-town business trip. When she returned, Henry *knew* something was amiss; he had not heard from her much while she had been away and, when he had called her, she would say, "Oh yeah, we're having fun," in a very "guarded" tone of voice. Henry point-blanked asked if she and her manager had something going on. "She tried to lie at *first*, but it just got *worse* when she'd try to lie; she wasn't good at it; she was very uncomfortable," he observed. After asking her a couple of other questions "to kind of pin her down," she admitted to having an affair. "Everything just came to a halt," and Henry was faced with the decision of, "What do I do now?" This was a critical point in his life—he had no income. He didn't even have a place to live anymore because he had leased his old home out, and *all* his dissertation books and work were in his and his partner's home office. But he knew he couldn't *stay* there: "It was just too painful and too weird and too emotional." Broken and unable to work, Henry called his research study contacts and explained, "I'm, I'm sorry. I've gone through this life event, and I, I'm in *no* shape to move forward with this study. I'm sorry, I have to let it go." And so, Henry "lost a golden opportunity to do some really meaningful academic work."

**Jane's Story**

January 3, 2000: "You have breast cancer in two spots in your right breast. It is probably in the lymph nodes. You will need aggressive chemo and aggressive radiation. "*I don't know what your prognosis is*. Do you have any questions?" Just 37, Jane had gone in for a routine mammogram and found herself flat on the biopsy table for four hours of trauma. A week later, she was called back in, and delivered this news by the doctor impersonally, coldly, and flatly. She looked at the doctor and said, "No, I don't have any questions. . . . I don't want you for my doctor. . . . I don't like you. You don't take my concerns seriously. . . . I need, I need you out of my life. . . . I can mail a check to you, but I can't write it right now." "Oh," he said, "Don't worry about it. This one's on the house." She said "Good!" It was one of the very few times in her life where Jane didn't care how the other person felt, and she *always* cares what people feel. So she left that doctor's office numb, "'cuz I had gone in all by myself because nobody said, 'Oh, by the way, I think you may have cancer.'" Driving home, she broke down, pulling over to the side of the road while shaking uncontrollably: "Happy fucking New Year to me!" For two years, that first doctor's ice-cold words were imprinted in her brain, resounding over and over: "You have breast cancer in two spots in your right breast. It is probably in the lymph nodes. You will need aggressive chemo and aggressive radiation. I don't know what your prognosis is. Do you have any questions?"

**Maria's Story**

Maria had been in the hospitality industry all her working life. At this time of her career, she was working closely with someone who "was very headstrong and stubborn." Maria felt that this person did not like her, or anybody, really. And this person was having an affair with Maria's boss. Someone eventually informed the General Manager about the affair, and Maria's boss, assuming it was Maria, fired her. Maria had *poured* herself into that job. Even though she was a single parent, her life was consumed with her job. She very rarely only worked 40 hours a week; most weeks, she put in around 60 hours. And, even though she owned her own home that she had bought *on* her own, she never got to enjoy it. With three children and many other obligations, home was "just a pit stop," where Maria would go and put her stuff down, make sure everybody was fed and homework was done, and then get up and do it all over again the next day. Oftentimes, she would have to pick up a second job just to help make ends meet. Maria expressed that she "didn't *enjoy* her *own* life, and her *own* self." Indeed, she was much too busy "living outside of her home." On the way home the day she was fired, she had to pull over. Sitting there, she thought, "That's it! I am *done* living *to* work. I am now going to work to *live."* That was on a Friday. The following Monday, Maria was in vocational school.

**Joe's Story**

The work was disappearing, and it was not like Joe didn't see it coming but, when he got laid off from his engineering job, he felt as if he had been "slapped in the face." "It was rough," he recalled. Joe went home and sat alone for a few hours, mulling it all over while waiting for his wife to get home. "We had to have that conversation . . . 'Well, what are we going to do now?'" He remembers it was just kind of somber, and neither he nor his wife had a whole lot to say. They were kind of prepared for it, "but it's hard to be *completely* prepared." And then, once it happened, it was "*tough*." His whole life, Joe felt as though he was "basically *groomed* to fit some white collar job" and, when that didn't happen, he had to start from scratch and learn new skills all over again. As a start, Joe sat down and looked back on his life and work, and tried to put it all together: "You know, the things that *had* some value associated to them, that I enjoyed doing." He realized that he always liked growing plants, and was very interested in agricultural systems. And he really liked helping people:

> I *like* the sense of value to my work, and I never got that as an engineer; I always felt like I just showed up and reviewed papers that didn't really mean anything to anyone in the long run. And received awesome money for it, you know? It's just . . . that, the money wasn't valuable enough for me to continue the job. Like, I just didn't have that much value associated to money, so I kind of realized that, you know, I'm *not* going to *ever* be happy pursuing wealth, and by sacrificing the whole year to work, and so I just kind of had to reassess.

Thus, Joe determined that his "happiness" and "sanity" had more value to him than financial security, and moved on to a completely different line of work and lifestyle.

**John's Story**

Very close to dying, John was diagnosed in the advanced stages of AIDS on December 1, 2000. Having outlived almost all of his friends, he had convinced himself that it couldn't be that. He just knew he was that small statistical minority there is for every virus and every bacteria that has natural immunity, for which we don't know why. By the time John was diagnosed, he had a CD4 count of 27, whereas a healthy person's is between 500 and 1,500. His viral load was in the hundreds of thousands, higher than the doctors had ever seen before. In shock and terrified for the first few days after diagnosis, when he really thought he was going to die, a surprising tranquility then took over, with intuition telling him that it just "wasn't his time." What was hardest for John during all of this was seeing his reflection in the eyes of the people he loved. All those people who were convinced he was going to die. It took John about six months to function again somewhat normally. This is the single event for which John can state unequivocally, "There was this event, at this point in time, and I changed drastically from right before to right after." While he has evolved his whole life, normally it is in little incremental steps, he pointed out, as other learning in his life experience that was not so "drastic": "Gradually, you find your place. . . . I came to a point in my life where I honestly, really, I could have chosen to die, but I didn't."

**Susan's Story**

Susan received notice at work that their IT desk was going to be shut down. Initially, she was offered relocation across the country. Considering that she was 56 years old, all of her family was in the area, and her mom was almost 85 years old, "Well, I knew for *sure,* I wasn't going to relocate. I mean, besides being expensive, you know." So Susan decided to look for something else in the company. But then, her employer said, "Ok, if you don't relocate, you get laid off." Susan had been "on the layoff list" for quite some time; for the past several years, they kept pushing her into different jobs. Consequently, she had been saving. While investigating her options, Susan found out she could actually take early retirement. She thought, "*Whoa*, wait a minute. Let me think about this." She hadn't planned on retiring until she was 65 or 67. But there were some major considerations that led her to consider the retirement package. One of the biggest was, Susan had many friends who, in their early 60s, had suddenly died. She was nearly that age: "Gosh, you never know what's going to *happen*. I mean, I got all these friends that didn't *even get to enjoy their retirement*! They just . . . suddenly *died*, when they were still what I consider young." Susan also realized that there were many things she wanted to do with her life: "I have these great coursing dogs. Man, I'm not going to *have* these dogs when I'm 70 years old, . . . and I'm not going to be able to get out and travel, and do all these things I wanted to do with my dogs, and visit all these people in other states." But Susan also had to think about her income. Some people thought she was crazy. But, "It just kind of came over me. All of a sudden, I said to myself, 'I want to *do* this.' It was just like a *revelation*, you know? *I just really got to do this*!" So, Susan took the early retirement package, travelled all over the U.S., and had a great time.

**Christy's Story**

Christy had used marijuana since an early age. When she and her husband met, he had never used it but was interested. They both used it for the duration of their careers, except for the last few years. Christy's husband stopped using it first, and became very involved in a Sangha (a Buddhist spiritual community). Christy just kept smoking marijuana. One morning, Christy got up and was doing the laundry, and got upset by the fact that she was doing *his* laundry, and made some comments about it. She had threatened her husband before with a divorce because she "didn't think that they were good together anymore." *This* time, Christy's husband said, "*Fine*." He had apparently already prepared himself to leave, and he did just that. Her husband did mention, however, that he didn't want a divorce, and would much rather try to get some marriage counseling. But Christy, in anger and frustration, said, "Nope, it isn't gonna happen. There's nothing I need in terms of counseling. If anybody needs counseling, you do." So, one minute, Christy was folding laundry and telling her husband she wanted a divorce, that that was it, "This is final, no more, I can't do this anymore," and the next minute, she's hearing the door close, and he's gone. . . . As a young couple, Christy and her husband had years of arguments and anger and frustration, but her husband had never left before. To Christy, that was rock bottom:

> You know, once I came out of that initial . . . phase of, of just sort of being *floored* by the fact that my husband would actually have the, ahm [silence], not audacity, but *determination*, . . . the *determination* on his face, I will remember it *forever*! . . . And the crux of the problem was . . . I was having an affair the entire time of our marriage. And, ah, the affair was with marijuana.

**Karen's Story**

Karen was 49 when she suddenly lost her mother. Her mom had been ill, but she was not expected to pass away. When Karen got that call, "It was just one of those really *surreal* kind of things, that, ahm, you know, 'This just can't be *real*.'" Karen related how "the memories of those last few minutes in that room, and making sure that was all ok, are just there, in my mind, forever. Pictures, *ingrained* in my head." Before, when people around her told her about a parent passing away, Karen was sad, but she had not realized then how "*significant"* it was to lose a parent. Karen suddenly realized *how* important her mother was in her life; even though she had known it before: "There are so many more things that became clear, after that." Right now, Karen's daughter has cancer, and everyone in her family has remarked about how much they wished Karen's mom was there, and how they just feel like she would have helped them deal with all of it *better*. And there are so many things that "come to her just *continually"* about her mom, and she just reflects: "Oh, that's why she did this." Or, "That's why she did that." Karen had no idea how much her mother's passing would impact her in her everyday life:

> There are so many days I just want a call from her. And now that my daughter is sick, that's become even more so. You know, when someone passes away, it's that first week or so, when everybody asks, "How are you? Are you ok?" Blah, blah, blah. The "I'll call you," and they don't. I don't know if they realize that, three months, six months, a year later, how that grieving is still *there,* to some extent.

**Mark's Story**

It was May of 1970, and Mark was a young man of 21, all set to fly with his friends on the university football team to a game that weekend. His best friend's father had invited him but, when he discovered that Mark would be breaking another commitment to go, his friend's father would not allow him to go. The night of the team's return, Mark was listening to the news on the radio, when a story came on to announce a preliminary report of a plane crash, with "no apparent survivors." The plane was only 10 seconds away from the runway, when it hit the trees. All 75 passengers on board were killed. Mark "just kind of ignored" that preliminary report. But the realization really hit him the next day, when he went to the crash site: "Once you saw the crash site, you knew nobody was coming out of it." Immediately, Mark realized, "We weren't as *invincible* as we *thought* we were." Since that tragic day, people who were connected to the crash, Mark said, "hardly ever talked about it, for probably a good 36 years. It's one of those things—if somebody mentioned it, said, you know, 'Weren't you involved with the Marshall University thing?' They usually would curtly respond, 'Yes,' and then change the subject." Growing up in the 60s and the 70s, Mark explained, "if you were a male, you were not supposed to show your emotions." He added, "And I think that was consistent with everybody who was connected with the crash." After that time, Mark took the attitude that, "I'm gonna enjoy every second, no matter what. I'm not gonna be afraid to take chances." He created his bucket list and retired early so he could complete it, and is still checking off items today. Number one on the list, though, was "Going back to Marshall."

**Kathy's Story**

In August of 1972, Kathy was nearing 30 and out on a date with someone else when she met her future husband. And it was where her mother had said, "You'll never meet anyone of any substance in a bar." Just three weeks later, they were engaged, and married soon after in December. Kathy had been engaged before, and she had had boyfriends. But when she turned 26, she got *really* lonely and, "frankly, wondered what I was going to do." Kathy said she had felt that way for several years until she met her future husband. She was actually in the process of taking a job in a faraway state. In fact, she was in the last stages of negotiating salary at that point and, a month later, would have been gone. Meeting her future husband totally changed Kathy's direction: "It was just the natural thing to do. We hit it off right away. . . . It was all good and very magical, and it was *fun*." Kathy felt very comfortable with this man:

> You could just *read* him, you know? What you saw was what you got. A very honest person, caring, respectful of me, and, ahm, I liked the way that he interacted with his parents and with other people. I kind of put him through his paces to see if he was the right one [laugh]. I felt it would be a good thing, and it *has* been for 41 years. I learned a lot from him. He was really good for *me*. He helped to saw off the rough edges. I still have rough edges. But, I mean, the really *rough* edges. . . . He helped to make me better.

**Kevin's Story**

Kevin had been working in the oil industry since 1980, which had gone through its ups and downs, but he had managed to survive and stay fairly employed during that whole time. But in February of 2000, Kevin was laid off, which had never happened to him before, and which was "quite a life-changing experience" for him: "I was very shocked." As a manager for a group of geologists and geophysicists, Kevin knew his company was going to have a layoff. One day, he went in to have a conversation with his boss and found out that:

> (a) I was going to have to layoff most of the members of my team because the company was downsizing, and then, (b) I was going to be laid off as well. And so, that made for a very interesting, ah, set of conversations. Almost, it was *surreal*, because I would go into someone's, let's pick Frank, for instance, and I'd say, "Frank, as you know, we're going through a restructuring today. Ah, you will not be continuing with the company, and so my instructions are that you need to go to this room where there will be a Human Resources Counselor to meet with you and give you a package, and you'll see there is an Outplacement Center," etc., etc. And every single person asked me, "What about you?" And I would say, "Well, I'm actually being laid off, as well, so I'll be seeing you at the Outplacement Center."

During this same period of time, Kevin's oldest son was in the throes of drug addiction and rebellion. And his father-in-law was dying of Alzheimer's. He recalled, "So, it was one of those kind of perfect, negative storms, and all of these things were *bad*, and they were all pretty much happening at the same time."

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