MONASH University

Natural Spirituality as an Educational Process: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

This research introduces Ostad Elahi's philosophy and draws on his work in order to explore the way my spiritual practices educated me and influenced my decisions toward creating change in my life. The study is an autoethnography and describes a journey to the depth of who I am. This methodology engages with stories about self that are related to culture. A principle aim was to trace the changes that happened in my behaviour and reactions, and in perceiving the world, by following the principles of Natural Spirituality and practicing its ethical exercises. To achieve this aim, I shared and analysed some of my experiences of carrying out the spiritual exercise of "prayer-attention" in five different countries and cultures, and discussed the challenges I encountered in doing the exercise.

The process of autoethnography in this thesis began with selecting some epiphanies among my prayer experiences that shared three themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk. The analysis of these themes illustrated how my present thoughts and behaviours are connected to my spiritual practices in the past, and how each practice moved me a few steps forward toward a deeper understanding of my inner self. It showed how practicing Ostad Elahi's philosophy in real life and in relation to people around me taught me to always question both my beliefs and my behaviour, and to change directions in my way of life based on my new perceptions.

This study connects different cultural pathways by exploring my personality not only as a follower of Ostad Elahi, but also as an Iranian woman, a mother, a student, and an immigrant. It, thus, encourages a diversity of views to come forward, may help other spiritual researchers to believe in the power of narrative, and contributes to the creation of a safe space for different spiritual beliefs and practices in Australia.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature: 

Name: Haleh Rafi

Date: 20 March 2018

To my Master …

With Humility and Love

Acknowledgements

Writing this thesis was a challenge; but it was also one of my greatest dreams come true, and thus was a source of joy to me all along. I am indebted to a host of people who made this journey so delightful and helped me complete this study. Here I write a few lines to express my love and sincere appreciation to all my research companions.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

I read the content of the email for the third time. I could not believe my eyes. It was the email I had fantasised about for so long. I read it over and over again, until I could see the words no more as tears started to well up in my eyes. I closed my eyes and told Him: "Thank you!" I saw Him smile, my eyes still closed. I knew being eligible to receive the scholarship would be a major breakthrough in my life and I felt deep happiness in my heart. "Help me make the best of it toward my self-knowledge" I asked Him, in the midst of my thanksgiving prayer. Little did I know then that my research would be an autoethnography and my dissertation would literally become an efficient means of understanding self.

Situating the Self

Over the past twenty years, I have been systematically practicing ethical principles following the teachings and thoughts of a mystical philosopher named Nur Ali Elahi (1895-1974), most widely known by his honorific Ostad Elahi ("Master" Elahi). The ethical practices were mostly based on respecting rights and accomplishing human duties with the aim of developing spiritual intellect and gaining self-knowledge. I learned about Ostad Elahi's philosophy mostly through the publications of his son Bahram Elahi who has researched Ostad Elahi's teachings for more than 50 years. Ostad Elahi's innovative approach to spirituality suggests that spirituality is a science (B. Elahi, 1999) and should be studied and practiced scientifically. Self-knowledge, in Ostad Elahi's philosophy of Natural Spirituality, is an important part of the process of spiritual growth; and for attaining self-knowledge spiritual students need to constantly assess their attributes, positive qualities, flaws, and weak points, through careful observation and analysis of their inner self.

Engaged with the practices in Natural Spirituality, I deeply understood that the only way to realize my human potentialities and to be able to practically live ethically I needed to know who I am. In other words, I learned that "understanding who I am is crucial to understanding how I should live" (Atkins, 2008, p. 1). I could not decide upon a proper personal way of life before I knew my resources, my abilities, and my limits. Therefore, I chose a way of life, concentrating on a few ethical principles, and practiced it in relation with people around me. I then found the flaws with that way of life – things that I failed to do according to limitations of my abilities and circumstances – and I modified things to a more suitable one as I gained more self-knowledge. Thus, I moved in a positive educational loop: I learned more about my self, I chose a more suitable way of life that in turn helped me discover deeper layers of my self, then I changed things in my lifestyle again, and so on.

This research, then, studies Natural Spirituality as an educational process. In the next sections, first I provide a background for my study in the form of a personal narrative where I briefly explain the context where I grew up, how I reacted to religion and spirituality in different stages of my life, how I began this study, how I chose autoethnography, and how autoethnography changed the nature of my research. Then I explain my epistemology and ontology in this research and state the research aim and objectives. Then I continue the chapter with a rationale for the research, the research significance, research questions, the scope of the study, and an overview of the thesis.

Before reading the next sections, I want readers to know that my explanations related to Iran and Iranian culture are based on my own observations and represent my own experiences. I am aware that people who lived in Iran in the same time may have different interpretations of similar situations.

Personal Narrative

As a child I grew up in Iran, which after the 1979 revolution turned to what I consider to be a dogmatic religious country. Like many other young rebellious girls, I soon became allergic to many religious rules presented in the society and in schools. To me, some of these rules could not be justified with common sense and at times seemed contradictory in favour of religious authorities. Back then, I generalized and considered all religions and everything associated with them, including spirituality, as the source of human ignorance.

When I was twenty years old, I had the chance to be acquainted with Ostad Elahi's philosophy (B. Elahi, 1987). Systematically practicing a list of ethical principles soon made me a completely different person. Not only my perspective toward spirituality changed, but every set of practice helped me find new aspects of my self, the meaning of life, and my rights and duties. I also found some positive changes in my behaviour. I could make better decisions, became more responsible in my daily tasks, grew to be more patient in judging others, and was motivated to learn more.

As an example of a change in my understanding and behaviour, I can refer to the way I valued compassion before and after the kindness practices. As a teenager and a young adult, I generally looked at kind people, who did good things unexpectedly and without expectation, as naïve people who constantly exposed themselves to potential swindlers (Perrault, 2013). It was after a few experiences of practices on kindness and voluntarily helping people that I could understand the value of being helpful to others. Although I could never help others utterly from a sense of human duty free from expectations, I still could feel the sheer delight when I had the chance to help someone. After some time, seeing people who played the Good Samaritan created a deep feeling of respect and awe in me.

The more I practiced Natural Spirituality, the more I wanted to know about the details of the philosophy. Over the years, Bahram Elahi published more books on Ostad Elahi's philosophy (B. Elahi, 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1997; 1999; 2001; 2005; 2007; 2009) and I gradually gathered enough background knowledge to begin reading Ostad Elahi's own writings (N. Elahi, 1994; 2001) in which he used the complex traditional language of Islamic philosophers with an Arabicized Persian prose. I also realised that some well-known researchers outside Iran researched Ostad Elahi's philosophy (Anvar, 2012; J. During, 2003; Morris, 2007) and I learned to look at some aspects of Natural Spirituality with a different perspective. I always wished I could be one of those researchers. Sometimes ideas came to my mind and I tried to write an essay based on an experience. However, considering political situations in Iran and my personal circumstances, I never saw a chance to academically research Natural Spirituality. Even when I migrated to other countries, I did not think of researching Ostad Elahi's philosophy, as I thought no one would be interested. Thus, one might guess how excited I was when I realised I could explore the influence of Natural Spirituality on my life as part of a PhD in Monash University in Australia.

At the beginning, I saw my research as a philosophical study. I wanted to explore Ostad Elahi's philosophy more deeply and in comparison with other spiritual philosophies in a secular and multi-faith society. I wanted to use autoethnography only as a part of my methodology to share some of my personal experiences as examples of the practical aspect of the philosophy. However, as I learned more about autoethnography, my research changed to a self-knowledge quest. All the stages of selecting data, presenting data, and thematically analysing data proved themselves as self-revealing processes that unveiled many of my previously hidden feelings, motivations and intentions.

Before I state the research aim and objectives, I explain my ontological and epistemological position in this research. In the next parts, I explain my ways of knowing, my ways of thinking, my position as researcher, and my contentions in this research.

Epistemology – My Ways of Knowing

Every piece of writing reflects its author's way of thinking (Chang, 2008). This study, thus, indirectly illustrates how I see the world, how I act in it and what I value. Trying to find a name for my way of knowing, I looked at the table of interpretive paradigms introduced by Denzin and Lincoln (2011b). I felt closest to being a constructivist, as I have a relativist ontology and generally believe in multiple realities and a "subjectivist epistemology" (p. 13). However, there are things in my view of reality that make my epistemology complex, hard to name and impossible to completely fit in one category.

Reality to me is in part objective and in part constructed. I believe that there is a part of reality that is identified through the application of science. This reality is universal. B. Elahi (1999) defines science as "the theoretical and experimental knowledge of established universal laws, independent of the observer, that govern creation" (p. 38). Accordingly, "a scientific endeavour is objective and value free" (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 20). In scientific laws there is a cause-and-effect relationship between different phenomena where certain causes lead to an effect. For example, there is a natural law that says people die when some parts of their body do not function properly. In this law "malfunctioning of some parts of the body" can be the cause, and "death" is the effect. I consider Natural laws as objective reality because they are independent of the observer and apply to all people regardless of their culture, race, or gender.

Since Natural Spirituality is introduced as a science in Ostad Elahi's philosophy, it discusses some fundamental principles and objective laws that "govern the realities of the spiritual dimension of creation" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 39). As an example of a spiritual law, I assume that "*one who serves others with a completely disinterested intention will experience a feeling of pure joy*" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 44). Here again, as a cause necessarily results in an effect ("serving others with a completely disinterested intention" results in experiencing a feeling of pure inner joy), the law is objective and applies to everyone, regardless of the particular time, culture, or place. Everyone can experiment with this law to verify its validity; but the field of spiritual experiment is the self, and those who want to experiment with spiritual laws must be aware that the limited knowledge of self can increase the probability of experimental errors (B. Elahi, 1999). Thus, to be able to experiment with the above spiritual law, for example, one at least has to have a fairly good knowledge of her or his intentions (there will be a discussion on the possibility of knowing intentions on page 45).

To practice Natural Spirituality, I needed to understand and observe some objective laws that resembled natural laws. I believe, for example, that "a human being or the self is essentially a psychospiritual organism temporarily residing in a biological body" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 19). However, I also believe that my attitudes are shaped by the cultural and social norms that operate within a particular context and time. I acknowledge that there is a part of reality that is "socially constructed by and between people who experience it" (Darlaston-Jones, 2007, p. 19). This part of reality is based on societal and cultural knowledges that are complex and multiple, are constructed from a particular point of view and within particular contexts, and can be created and exchanged through decisions and actions (Mingé, 2015). Therefore, this part of reality is different for each human being because of each individual's particular experiences and unique understanding of the world (Darlaston-Jones, 2007).

Through my experiences, I have learnt that although spiritual laws are objective and apply to everyone, people have different understandings of them and react differently to them. I also presume that time is an effective factor in shaping the constructive part of reality and people have different interpretations of their experiments with the same law in different stages of their life. My constructed reality is shaped by my personal experiences when I try to experiment with objective spiritual laws in relation to others. It consists of my current perceptions of my inner self and my surroundings, and it strongly influences my judgments, decisions and behaviour. The narratives in my diaries are mainly based on my constructed reality and show how I have been understanding objective spiritual laws, how I have been reacting to them and to what extent I could practice them in society. In other words, my constructed reality is made by the way I look at and react to the objective reality.

Ontology – My Position and System of Belief

I should also clarify my position as a researcher to help readers follow the discussions in this thesis more easily. Explaining who I am is important because, as Jenks (2002) indicates in her autoethnography, "who I am affects what I observe, what I write, and how others will react to what I say" (p. 184). In stating my position, I first refer to my gender because being a woman makes a difference in terms of how I situate myself in relation to what I read and write (Roof & Wiegman, 1995). I then refer to the place where I was born and grew up because its history has shaped my culture and has influenced my creative behaviours and methods of thinking (Bhawuk, 2003). My researcher "I" is a woman, born and grown up in Iran and thus, the process of thinking, understanding and analysing in my mind is different from those who have different backgrounds.

I grew up in an environment where people around me believed that unlike men who use their reason, women mostly respond to their surroundings emotionally. Not only in my family, but also in all stages of school – primary school, junior high school, high school, and even in university – I was often treated based on this belief and this highly affected my process of perceiving and reacting to the world, first as a young girl and then as a woman. In conversations I had with my father and many of my teachers, I was continually told that my thoughts were highly built on sensations rather than reasoning. I gradually became convinced that this was a fact about me and I was feeling disappointed. Perhaps it was an unconscious resistance to this belief that I became interested in Persian spiritual texts and found consolation in mysteries that did not have real solutions and were generally understood "through the heart, not by reasoning" (Pazouki, 2006, p. 71). Perhaps, by being engaged with such texts I tried to turn the weak point to something I could be proud of. I intentionally focused on my emotions when I was thinking and tried to imitate metaphorical spiritual poetry when I was writing.

Looking at myself now, I see that a large part of my perceptions have been shaped by my feelings. This view of myself affects my researcher "I". I think I need to put in extra effort to transfer my feelings, emotional understandings and inner thoughts into analytical academic writing and fill the blank spots that might be ambiguous for readers. To this hardship I need to add the difficulty of writing in English. My native language is Persian (Farsi) and in order to communicate in English I constantly need to translate and many times fail to find the right words or expressions for the idea I need to share. This is how my gender, the place where I was born and grew up, and the place where I research together influence the process of writing in this autoethnography.

Contentions. The most important contention of this research is that being engaged with spirituality can be seen as an educational process and can accordingly affect one's behaviour. I argue that being involved in spirituality not only changed my perspectives toward the world and educated me toward a better self-knowledge, but also generally changed the way I learned. From the day I began the spiritual practices, learning became a different experience for me, as a lesson – irrespective of the subject being taught – began to deal with issues surrounding the fundamental meaning and purpose of life (Wright, 2000).

Another contention in this research is that one can generally believe in a system of thought even if one cannot understand some of its theoretical knowledge (B. Elahi, 1999). Being engaged in Natural Spirituality I gradually found a comprehensive logical system of thought in Ostad Elahi's teachings; and then the belief came. Although I never had the chance to meet Ostad Elahi personally (he passed away in 1974, when I was only two years old), I have tried my best to know him both by studying and practicing Natural Spirituality each and every day of my life for the past twenty years. Practicing the ethical principles, I started to understand – to some degree – some fundamental principles. Seeing the results of my practices not only made me accept the principles that I clearly understood, but also encouraged me to believe in those principles that were difficult for me to understand.

I think believing in the principles of Natural Spiritualty has affected my interpretations and analyses of my experiences. Therefore, I share some of my beliefs with readers to help them make sense of the analyses and communicate with the discussions in the thesis better. As the upcoming paragraphs are mostly about my beliefs, I need to ask readers to keep in mind, while reading the next paragraphs, that to believe is something subjective and I do not intend to propose my beliefs as valid truth for everyone.

I think the most important change that happened to me by practicing Natural Spirituality was that I began to think there existed a creator who was kind, just and wise. As Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2007) explains, human beings cannot truly perceive the nature of God, and the only way one can acquire some knowledge of God is through knowing oneself. In Islamic mysticism, God is usually presented as the Beloved to Whom the seeker's soul is eager to rejoin. This is how I imagine God when I feel His presence. I communicate with Him and receive answers in the form of some inner warmth; and I believe through the relation with God I can develop divine virtues within me, overcome my weak points and move toward spiritual maturity. I also began to accept some spiritual principles about which I had never thought before my engagement with spirituality. I explain four of them that are directly related to my discussions in this thesis. These principles are discussed in detail in Chapter 2 where I explain Ostad Elahi's philosophy as my theoretical framework.

First, I accepted "the principle of successive lives" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 55). Based on this principle, my soul would live in different bodies in a cycle of lives to acquire the necessary experiences for maturation and complete the educational stages in the process of perfection. Second, I believed in "the principle of the middle way" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 89) in which determinism and free are reconciled. According to this principle, things that happen to people might be either the consequences of their own decisions and actions or have reasons beyond their control. People are responsible for their own actions "to the extent that God has endowed human beings with the will to choose and the power and freedom to act" (B. Elahi 1993a, p. 57). Third, I accepted the idea that my intentions could overshadow my actions. Thought, in Ostad Elahi's philosophy, plays a crucial role in spiritual development. I believe that my intentions affect the course of my life even if I never have the opportunity to actualize those intentions (B. Elahi, 2009).

Last but not least, I began to see spirituality as an educational process from which I did not expect miracles. I learned to neither expect nor ask for supernatural help in difficult situations. It does not seem logical for someone to expect not to have a car accident just because he or she has a college degree. In the same way, it is irrelevant for a practitioner of spirituality to expect a miracle and ask God, for example, to help his or her child recover from a disease faster than usual as a reward for his or her good deeds. The path of spiritual perfection is called the "spiritual university" by B. Elahi (1993a) and a student in that university studies to obtain spiritual knowledge and understanding. To spiritually improve, one should have no material expectations. The reward of my good deeds, then, will manifest in developing my soul toward perfection.

Research Aim and Objectives

Based on my ways of knowing, my position, my contentions and how I situate myself as a researcher, my research aim is to trace the changes that have happened in my behaviour and reactions, and in perceiving experiences and understanding the world by following the principles of Natural Spirituality. In other words, I plan to research how practicing ethical exercises has influenced my decisions toward creating change in my life.

To fulfil this aim, in this thesis I share and analyse some of my experiences of carrying out the spiritual exercise of "prayer-attention" in five different countries and cultures: in Iran, my home country, and also in France, The United States, Spain, and Australia, in which I have had the chance to live for some time. In the analyses I discuss the challenges I encountered in doing the exercises while I was developing new capacities in me and investigate the influence of culture on my practices.

Research Questions

In accordance with the study's aim and objectives, this research is guided by the following research questions. The main question in this research is:

- **How has practicing Natural Spirituality educated me and changed my reactions and behaviour?**

And the sub-questions are:

- In what ways has living in a different cultural milieu influenced my spiritual practices?
- How flexible were the exercises in Natural Spirituality when I tried to practice them in the new culture?
- What new challenges entered my life when I started to engage with Natural Spirituality?
- How did Natural Spirituality help me with the challenges of life?

Rationale for the Research

This research has been remarkable in helping me to investigate my spiritual personality and get an in-depth knowledge of some aspects of my inner self. By reflecting on the nuances of my spiritual experiences and highlighting the relationship of the experiences to culture (Holman Jones, Adams, Ellis, 2015b), I could connect the self and the social context (Chang, 2011), examine the intersection of my spiritual and my cultural self, and make sense of some of the implications of my experiences within the bigger context of my life. However, the significance of this study goes further than self-knowledge and self-development in terms of its contribution.

The Significance

My research is significant in two different contexts. First, it adds to research conducted on Ostad Elahi's philosophy and second it expands the spirituality research in Australia. Ostad Elahi's work has been translated (Morris, 2007) and his life and philosophy have been discussed in different books and articles in Western societies (Anvar, 2012; DeBell, 2009; E. During, 2000). Ostad Elahi's official websites also publish articles written by people who share their personal experiences of their spiritual practices. However, to my knowledge, no academic research has ever been done on personal experiences of a spiritual student who follows and practices the principles of Natural Spirituality.

Also, there seem to be some gaps among existing spiritual autoethnographies. Not many published spiritual autoethnographies discuss Eastern philosophies and there are none about Ostad Elahi's philosophy. My research adds the voice of a spiritual traveller on an unfamiliar path to the existing research and offers a fresh perspective in the field. This voice of the Other can enrich spiritual research in Australia and expand its borderlines. "The Other" here refers to "Others of difference" (Chang, 2011, p. 17) who are people with different values and experiences. This research provides an opportunity for what Levinas calls encountering with the Other in order to reduce misunderstandings (Roberts, 2013).

In the next section – the scope of the study – I further explain where this study began, how it has been changed and how conducting this research can make a difference in terms of spirituality research. However, before this, I need to clarify one important point about my research. I am aware that sometimes sharing one's beliefs is seen as an attempt to proselytize. This is not my intention, rather by offering a fresh perspective I intend to share something that is not commonly known in Australia, where I now live and work.

The Scope of the Study

Denzin (2014) begins his book, *Interpretive autoethnography*, with a quote from James Arthur Baldwin:

> You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well you probably can't but also knowing that … the world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimeter, the way … people look at reality, then you can change it. (p. v)

When I began this research, what I had in mind was to write in order to change the world. Practicing Natural Spirituality with motivating techniques and observing the tolerance growing in me, I wanted to know if adding Natural Spirituality to the educational curriculum in Australia might make a difference. I had a hypothesis that practicing Natural Spirituality in schools, with its focus on the inside rather than outside, could make the whole process of education more meaningful. As spirituality has the potential to connect people (Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007), I thought it could help children to see the unity in all things around them and learn that the promotion of each person in the world is only possible through the promotion of all (Manolache, 2006).

I gradually noticed, however, that in order to offer Natural Spirituality (as a possible approach to spirituality) to a country's learning framework, first I had to have a clearer idea of what has happened to me. I needed to methodically analyse the experiences recorded in my diaries, look at them in relation to the "macro- and micro-cultures" (Chang, 2011, p. 16) of which they are part, and write my way to clarity and deeper understanding. I also needed to know how the systematic practicing of ethical principles changed me.

Therefore, I decided to do an autoethnography and analyse my experiences of practicing Natural Spirituality in different countries. Over more than twenty years of practice, I gathered reports and stories in my diaries and have been able to review them and assess and evaluate my efforts. In the methodology chapter I explain why and how I chose only seven stories to use as data for this research. I still think that the in-depth analysis of my personal experiences might still – as Arthur Baldwin (Denzin, 2014) explained – alter the world by a millimetre.

Overview of Thesis

This thesis consists of eight chapters. An introduction, a conclusion, a theoretical framework, a literature review, a methodology chapter, and three chapters in which I discuss my experiences. In this Introduction, I have provided a background for the research, situated myself as a researcher, introduced the aim and the objectives, explained my epistemology and ontology, discussed the rationale for the research, mentioned the research questions, and clarified the scope of the study.

In Chapter 2, I review spirituality through the theoretical lens of Ostad Elahi's thoughts and teachings. The chapter begins with an introduction to Ostad Elahi's life and work, and the basic aspects of his philosophy. Then I provide additional layers of understanding for some spiritual notions from the perspective of Ostad Elahi's philosophy. These are notions like prayer, miracle, submission to God's will, the utility of faith, and the process of assimilating ethical principles that are used in the analysis of my experiences in the discussion chapters. At the end of the chapter I introduce Natural Spiritualty as an experimental science and explain the notions of spiritual university and spiritual student.

In Chapter 3, the literature review chapter, I discuss research related to my study. The chapter begins with definitions of spirituality and continues with debates on spiritualty and religion, and spirituality and critical thinking. I then bring my working definition of spirituality, review the most influential spirituality researchers in my study, and explain the situation of spirituality in the context of Australia. After that, I review the literature that addresses the key subjects and main themes in the analysis, namely prayer and contemplation, faith and doubt, and mysticism. At the end of the chapter I review research with narrative approaches on spirituality, especially on spirituality and autoethnography.

In Chapter 4, the methodology chapter, I explain my research approach, method and design. I give reasons for the choice of autoethnography, provide my personal definition of autoethnography, and explain my data generation and data selection methods. I then discuss the six steps of analysis, mostly based on Ellis's (2004) thematic analysis of narrative, and provide an evaluation of autoethnography and ethical issues that are relevant to my research.

Chapter 5 is the first discussion chapter. In this chapter, I analyse an epiphany among my spiritual practices of prayer-attention that happened to me in Spain. Before analysing the story, I write a short background of my practices of prayer-attention, and introduce the three themes that were extracted from the experience: faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risks. Using these themes as analytical devices, in the autoethnographic analysis of the epiphany I explain how my faith was challenged in the experience, how I was socially, culturally and spiritually being Othered, why I considered my choice of praying in the church that day as a dignified risk, and eventually, how the spiritual exercise provided me with deeper self-knowledge, and changed my attitudes.

In Chapters 6 and 7 I continue analysing stories related to the epiphany discussed in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6 I analyse four stories of answered prayers that happened to me in France, Iran, and Australia. In Chapter 7 I discuss two stories of unanswered prayers that happened to me in Iran. While Chapter 6 is mostly built on the spiritual notion of miracle, in Chapter 7 I discuss my understanding of the notion of submission to God's will. The main themes – faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk – stay almost the same in the analysis of all stories. At the end of Chapter 7 I provide an overview of the analysis in the three discussion chapters and explain how the research questions have been answered.

In Chapter 8, the Conclusion, I summarise the responses to the research questions, explain the transforming power of autoethnography, discuss the study's contribution to knowledge, and provide recommendations for further research.

Notes on Structure and Writing

Every piece of writing has special characteristics that are generated based on the text's content and the writer's approach. To provide a satisfying degree of textual integrity, this thesis demanded for certain structural features and specific use of language. For example, I wanted my thesis to be conceived as a sort of handbook. Considering the length of the work, I found it improbable that someone wants to read the whole thesis. Thus, I planned to write the chapters in a way so that they can be studied independently of one another according to the needs of the reader. To do so, I began every chapter with an introduction and synthesised the content of the discussion chapters in a conclusion section. I am aware that these summaries might seem excessive to the eye of a person who reads the whole thesis; however, the decision was necessary to fulfil my intention for the thesis.

Arranging the shape of the chapters, I indented all the stories in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 as I wanted them to be distinguished from the analysis that comes after them. Also, right before Chapter 5, I inserted a separate introductory section – titled Prologue – in which I presented a picture of a page of one my diaries written in Persian, along with its English translation (my own translation). I decided to share that extract from my diary with readers to intimately show them how I used my raw data to explore deeper layers of my writings.

In my writing, I capitalised the word Other – both as a noun and a verb – as is written in most philosophical and psychological texts; however, in the direct quotations I cited from other works, sometimes the word is not capitalised. I hope this explanation helps to reduce confusion. I also decided to separate the words "my" and "self" whenever I discussed about my inner self; the word "self" in such sentences might also refer to my personality, my identity, or my whole being.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

This research is an autoethnography that investigates the educational impacts of Natural Spirituality on my thoughts and behaviour in different situations in my life. I analyse some of my experiences of practicing Natural Spirituality, following teachings and thoughts of Ostad Elahi. In this chapter I explain the theoretical framework I have utilised in pursuing this aim, and discuss Ostad Elahi's philosophy to the extent I have understood it.

In the initial section of this chapter I overview Ostad Elahi's life and work and explain how Bahram Elahi, his son, has turned Ostad Elahi's oral teachings to books written with scientific language. In the second section, I give an explanation of some basic aspects of Ostad Elahi's philosophy, including the process of self perfection, the idea of human bi-dimensionality, the principles of causality and successive lives, and the significance of education of thought and communicating with the Source.

In the following sections of the chapter, I address the concepts of prayer, miracle, submission, and faith. These concepts are key subjects in this thesis, and the autoethnographic analysis is thematically built upon them. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on the process of assimilating ethical principles in human beings and the notion of the spiritual student in the spiritual university.

The content of this chapter is mostly based on B. Elahi's (1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1997; 1999; 2001; 2005; 2207, 2009) publications, J. During's (2003) book on Ostad Elahi's unique art of music, Morris's (2007) introduction in Ostad Elahi's *Knowing the spirit*, and Anvar's (2012) biographical book on Malak Jan Nemati – Ostad Elahi's sister and disciple. This chapter functions as a blueprint for the whole thesis and specifically prepares the reader for the literature review on similar spiritual themes and concepts in Chapter 3.

Ostad Elahi's Life and Work

Nur Ali Elahi was a mystic, a philosopher, and a great musician. He was born in 1895 in a Kurdish village located in the province of Kermanshah in western Iran. The title of Ostad, which literally means professor or master in Persian, was added posthumously by those who became aware of the true nature of his spiritual personality (B. Elahi, 2005) and it is the honorific by which he is most widely known today. The outward course of Ostad Elahi's life can be divided into three distinct periods (Morris, 2007). The first period was his childhood and youth that was spent in a small village and was entirely devoted to traditional forms of ascetic and religious training. The second period was the time of his active public career as a prosecutor, magistrate, and high-ranking judge. And the third period was the time of his retirement that was more openly devoted to spiritual teaching and writing when he became well known as a religious thinker, philosopher, and theologian.

During the first third of his life under the attentive supervision of his father, who was an enlightened mystic himself, Ostad Elahi lived in complete seclusion from the world like the traditional mystics (B. Elahi, 1997) and devoted his life to ascetic practices, prayers, and mastering the tanbur – a lutelike stringed instrument specially used for spiritual music in religious gatherings (J. During, 2003). For 12 consecutive years, from the age of nine to 21, he lived in an atmosphere of pure spirituality and followed a long cycle of 40-day periods of fasting and ascetic retreats (Anvar, 2012). It was through those ascetic practices that he developed the basic foundations of his later philosophic and spiritual thinking (Morris, 2007) and became ready to improve his mystical experiences by taking a completely different approach to spirituality.

After his father's death in 1920, Nur Ali continued his life of contemplation and fasting in his village. He was living a life in which he had everything one could wish for. He was well-positioned due to the lands he inherited from his father and was surrounded by his loving family and devoted followers who worshipped him (J. During, 2003). However, soon he decided to leave his peaceful life and confront the outside world to build upon his spiritual experiences and "test his principles in the crucible of society" (DeBell, 2009, p. 314). He left his retreat, and, despite his aversion to doing so (Anvar, 2012), accepted a government post at the office of the civil registry in Kermanshah. Later, he moved to Tehran where he began to study civil law and, after completing his studies at the newly formed National School of Jurisprudence in 1933, embraced a judicial career. For almost thirty years he was appointed to positions of increasing responsibility in different cities in Iran, each with its special culture.

By practicing his spiritual principles in different cultures, Ostad Elahi gathered a rich set of practical experiences with which he could elaborate his philosophy. Through these experiences he ascertained that spirituality undertaken in the heart of society was more effective than retreating into solitude and engaging in ascetic practices (Anvar, 2012). In Ostad Elahi's (B. Elahi, 2009) own words, each year spent in these sensitive posts – that contained all kinds of temptations to which he did not succumb – had the same spiritual value as all those 12 years of his ascetic practice combined.

It is not easy to fully appreciate the difficulty of such a transition. This radical change was exceptional in the history of spirituality and mysticism. As a prominent journalist once noted, "the traditional mystics withdrew from society to lead a life of ascetic contemplation, whereas Ostad Elahi took the opposite path, thereby accomplishing the seemingly impossible" (B. Elahi 1997, p. xix).

The deliberate transition that happened in the second period of Ostad Elahi's life marked "the beginning of an entirely novel paradigm of spiritual practice" (Anvar, 2012, p. 30). The result of his experiments in different existing cultures in Iran became a rational, coherent, and practical system of thought (B. Elahi, 1997) that can be adapted to human beings of today's era in different parts of the world.

After his retirement from the judiciary in 1957, Ostad Elahi remained in Tehran, and focused on establishing a theoretical framework for his spiritual experiences through authorship and teachings. He published two major scholarly books (N. Elahi, 1994; N. Elahi, 2001), and began to develop much more fully the practical spiritual dimension of his philosophy through the oral teachings that he shared with a few friends and some of his students. Two volumes of Ostad Elahi's spiritual teachings (B. Elahi, 1987; B. Elahi, 1995) have been published on the basis of notes written down by his students during this period. These collected sayings "reveal a voice suffused with wisdom and benevolence" (Anvar, 2012, p. 31) and show "a penetrating understanding of human nature, a constant concern for intelligibility, and the sensitive use of immense learning in the service of a creative and original way of thinking" (Morris, 2007, p. 9).

Bahram Elahi and the Foundation of Natural Spirituality

The most important books on the philosophy of Ostad Elahi have been written by his son, Bahram Elahi. Bahram Elahi was born in Iran, received his medical training in France, and returned to Tehran, where he led a distinguished academic and clinical career, became the Dean of several medical schools and authored a number of textbooks on anatomy as well as paediatric surgery and urology.

In an introduction to one of his books (B. Elahi, 1997), after briefly introducing himself as a professor of anatomy, Bahram Elahi explains that he does not mention his title or professional accomplishments to confer authority on his words but rather to emphasize that he is "familiar with rational thinking and the scientific approach" (p. xvii) and is interested in "the kind of knowledge that has practical and concrete implications" (p. xix).

Parallel to his professional career, Bahram Elahi has also thoroughly researched the origins, application and role of ethics and spirituality in contemporary society, both on the theoretical and the practical level, for more than 40 years basing his work on the philosophy and teachings of his father. For the past several years, he has spent his time translating and writing books on his father's philosophy, called Natural Spiritualty, and giving lectures at French and American universities.

Bahram Elahi approaches spirituality as a science. The word science, B. Elahi (1997) explains, can be applied to spirituality because "spiritual phenomena, processes and stages of development abide by extremely rigorous laws and rules, and it is the function of a spiritual system to establish and elucidate these rules" (p. xx). Just like there is difference in reasoning and measurement between doing research in biological science and doing research in social science, when one shifts from the physical dimension of human beings to the spiritual one a new form of logic appears for the experimentations.

Although, in his writings, Bahram Elahi uses a more scientific language than his father's oral teachings in comparing the structures of the body and of the soul, he always maintains that "his knowledge was like a drop in the ocean" (DeBell, 2009, p. 314) in comparison to his master's knowledge, and that his work is "the result of Ostad Elahi's own research" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. xix) to the extent that he has practised and understood it.

Basic Aspects of Ostad Elahi's Philosophy

Ostad Elahi's thought has been developed on the soil of Greek philosophy, as mediated by the rich tradition of Arab and Persian commentators (E. During, 2011), and his philosophical ideas have been compared to those of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Iamblichus (E. During, 2000; Euker, 2013, Morris, 2007). His philosophy is also aligned with the approach of Islamic spirituality and mysticism (Anvar, 2012). However, the experts who have studied Ostad Elahi's writings and researched his teachings and thought agree that his philosophy, far from being a repetitive imitation, has profound originality and surprising modernity in the field of spirituality (Anvar, 2012; E. During, 2011, J. During, 2003). According to Anvar (2012), the effectively novel aspect of Ostad Elahi's philosophy is that it is based on both the spiritual and social nature of human beings, gives special importance to the attribute of tolerance, and surpasses dogmatic and ritualistic frameworks.

Ostad Elahi compares a spiritual journey to "the gradual, slowly cumulative process of human education" (Morris, 2007, p. 17) and has a "carefully nourished respect for the entire perennial range of individual spiritual experiences" (Morris, 2007, p. 20). In his teaching, he provides his followers with an infinitely rich and open-ended domain of relevant spiritual experience related to his theories and invites them to engage with spirituality actively, that is to do research and ask questions. He implicitly asks the readers of his books to question their assumptions and revisit their intuitions before making a judgement, and make an effort to discover unexpected meanings and perspectives, or to probe for appropriate illustrations and implications (Morris, 2007) to better understand the theories. The open-endedness of the experiences sets his thought free from dogma and gives readers the opportunity to use his philosophy in their own path of perfection.

Like many great spiritual leaders, Ostad Elahi does not reject any religion or faith. He believes that there is no difference between religions, and spirituality is by no means the prerogative of any specific doctrine. In his philosophy, "all the religions are really only one, because God is one: His messengers drew their knowledge from the same Source and received the same fundamental commandments" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 134). In his philosophy, he never attempts to impose a single "true" conception (Morris, 2007, p. 20) or to disprove or dismiss differing views. Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2007) advises all truth seekers to beware of those who believe they are the only ones who possess the truth and reject other beliefs: "The truth is in each one of us, and God is everywhere. God will show the way to whoever relies wholeheartedly on Him and asks Him to show them the way" (B. Elahi, 1993b, p. 12).

Although Ostad Elahi's philosophy encompasses a vast area of spiritual and religious subjects, I summarise some of its fundamental aspects, in seven key points (Comte, 2009), that are related to analysing my experiences in this thesis.

1- The Process of Self Perfection

The central concept in Ostad Elahi's teaching is the process of self-perfection that, going far beyond developing physical or mental faculties, refers to bringing the self to full spiritual maturity (Comte, 2009). In Ostad Elahi's philosophy, the essential reality of human beings comes down to their consciousness (B. Elahi, 1997). Thus, the process of self perfection is the process of deepening and expanding consciousness, until it reaches a level where "it perceives the reality of the entire universe with such clarity that nothing remains unknown" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 94). This is when a human being becomes capable of re-joining divine consciousness.

The ultimate aim of spiritual progress is to gain divine knowledge and this happens only by gaining self-knowledge. God is everywhere, but spiritual voyagers must first discover God "in the innermost depths of their own self" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 202). Thus, the process of self perfection begins from learning to look within (B. Elahi, 1999). Spiritual progress can be achieved only when human beings take full responsibility to raise human traits within themselves to the highest level (Comte, 2009) until these traits become of the same quality as God's attributes.

Knowing the self and developing human attributes requires some systematic practice. The best approach toward knowing the self, according to Ostad Elahi's philosophy, is through fighting the imperious self in the ordinary challenges of daily life. The imperious self is both a receptor of negative energy and a generator of harmful desires (B. Elahi, 2005). Fighting the imperious self is usually performed in two phases (B. Elahi, 2011; B. Elahi, 2012). The first phase, called in-vitro practice, is the mental exercise and is undertaken through observing and analysing one's reactions in a particular situation, reflecting on divine principles, and deciding to change something in thoughts and behaviour (Perrault, 2017). The second phase, called in-vivo practice, is accomplished through taking concrete actions in everyday life and in contact with others. While the in-vitro practice is necessary for self-knowledge, it is only through in-vivo practice and resisting the desires of the imperious self in the reality of daily life and in moments of crisis that one can truly learn about "the inner-antiethical personality" (E. During, 2011, p. 156) nested within oneself. The more one fights the imperious self, the more one knows about it and the better one can control it. In a slow but progressive awakening of a heightened level of awareness, one gradually knows the multi-layered texture of the self and begins to develop different human traits within oneself.

Developing human traits can then contribute to a better self-knowledge. When a human trait reaches its highest level, it acts as a source of light that shines in the unconscious, illuminates the mind, and leads to a clearer knowledge of self (B. Elahi, 2005). It is only by reaching the state of complete self-realisation and perfect self-consciousness that human nature is brought to full bloom (Comte, 2009). This is when human beings "can communicate with all the beings of the universe with profound insight and complete awareness – that is, to understand all the existent graces in the universe and to enjoy them fully" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 238). To get a more concrete meaning of the concept of perfection, however, one needs to know how Ostad Elahi sees a human being.

2- Human Bi-Dimensionality

In Ostad Elahi's teachings, humans are two-dimensional beings composed of a body and a soul (B. Elahi, 2005). The biological body, which is a "temporary receptacle for the celestial soul" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 18) is endowed with a psyche and an intellect that enables human beings to evolve in a natural environment regulated by physical and social determinism (Comte, 2009). The celestial soul, however, is the origin of reason, willpower, and moral conscience in human beings and constitutes their true identity (B. Elahi, 2005).

The two dimensions in human beings, the body and the soul, are not merely juxtaposed, but closely connected (Comte, 2009) because they together make the self as "a psychospiritual organism" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 233). In order to move towards perfection, this intricate psychospiritual organism needs to "synthesize celestial molecules from within its character units" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 111) and transform them first to celestial virtues and then to divine virtues.

The pure and innocent, but immature, celestial soul is incapable of going through the process of perfection without merging with the terrestrial soul and living in the body. The celestial soul resembles a seed that potentially contains a tree and the body is like a pot filled with soil in which the soul should be placed (B. Elahi, 1993a). The body, thus, has an important role in the process of perfection and its rights should be observed meticulously. Like soil that should be watered and fertilized so that a seed could properly germinate in it, the body should be kept in good health, treated when ill, and entertained within the limits of what is licit (B. Elahi, 1997). It should never be weakened through excessive ascetic exercises and self-mortification. However, no matter how important the body is, it should never be allowed to become an obstacle to spiritual progress. The body should be used as an instrument to boost the process of perfection, or as a means of transportation (B. Elahi, 1993a) that eases the long journey for the spiritual traveller. In fact, the most important responsibility of human beings is to establish the right harmonious balance between their body and soul.

Through the journey in the path of perfection, human beings should take care of their psychospiritual organism, in order for the self to progress towards its maturation in a healthy manner; and to do this, one needs to look at spirituality as a medicine of the soul.

3- Spirituality as the Medicine of the Soul

The medicine of the soul, similar to that of the body, has two practical functions to preserve the health of the psychospiritual organism (B. Elahi, 2001). Its first function is prevention that encompasses the hygiene and nutrition of the psychospiritual organism. The second function is therapy that provides cures for its probable illnesses.

The psychospiritual organism is continuously exposed to various dangers throughout the course of life from both intrinsic and extrinsic forces (B. Elahi, 2001). It is the duty of human beings to do their utmost to keep it in health and harmony until it reaches maturity. To accomplish this task, they need to use their transcendent reason, rely on their spiritual willpower and diligently practice divine ethics.

In agreement with the idea of virtue being a state of equilibrium between excess and deficiency set forth in the philosophy of Aristotle, Ostad Elahi explains how spirituality specifies the conditions necessary for a balanced and progressive growth of the soul (Comte, 2009). This balance is gained mainly by practicing divine ethics. However, to properly practice divine ethics, spiritual travellers need to develop their celestial reasons, have "a correct education of thought" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 69) and learn to respect rights.

4- Education of Thought and Respect of Rights

Human beings are reasoning beings and through thinking they nourish themselves with ideas, give shapes to their desires and form their projects. Thought constantly circulates throughout the totality of human beings' field of perception, much like blood circulates throughout the body, and is responsible for nutritional, respiratory and immune functions in the psychospiritual organism (B. Elahi, 2001).

When thought is appropriately educated, it can support the self to become immune from the negative influences of the spiritual ecosystem. One can properly nourish the self by selecting and assimilating "correct spiritual principles" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 72), and keep the psychospiritual organism refreshed by choosing to breathe clean well oxygenated spiritual air (B. Elahi, 2001), and this can be achieved only through thinking.

Education of thought is a necessary spiritual practice through which human beings can change their habits, develop new capacities and reshape their character in a positive way. A correct education of thought (B. Elahi, 2001) provides human beings with the necessary knowledge to preserve the psychospiritual organism and enables them to gradually overcome the impulses of the imperious self and thus, ensures the natural growth of the self (B. Elahi, 2005). The emphasis on the natural growth of the soul is the reason Ostad Elahi's philosophy is introduced as Natural Spirituality.

Education of thought together with observing rights are the twin foundations of ethics in Natural Spirituality (Comte, 2009). While education of thought is related to the personal aspect of spiritual practice, respecting the rights of others constitutes the social part of it. Observing the rights of others, in Ostad Elahi's philosophy, is considered as the cornerstone of life and is applicable in all aspects of human relationships. This is where Ostad Elahi draws upon the classical formula of the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is an ethical code which can be found in various religious traditions including the ancient Egyptian religion, the ancient Roman and Greek religions, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Bakker, 2013). It is written in the Bible as "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31, New International Version). While the rule might be interpreted slightly differently in every religious tradition, it generally means to imagine oneself in others' shoes (Hooker, 2005), or to put oneself in the place of others or in every situation (B. Elahi, 2005). However, Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2005) advises his followers to practice this rule wisely and be careful not to satisfy whatever others may desire. For efficiently educating thought and respecting rights, human beings need to develop their spiritual understanding and obtain a knowledge of the causal system.

5- Spiritual Understanding and the Principle of Causality

Spiritual understanding has a significant place in Ostad Elahi's philosophy. In a completely new approach to spirituality, Ostad Elahi responds to the needs of modern human beings who are more attracted to intellect rather than sentiment (B. Elahi, 2001), rely more on reason than emotion, and need to understand to be convinced and persuaded to actively take steps on the divine path (B. Elahi, 2005).

Without underestimating the roles of intuition and emotion in the process of self-perfection, Ostad Elahi puts a special emphasis on rational understanding and defines spirituality as a science based on objective realities that can provide solid ground for an experimental approach (Comte, 2009). Spiritual understanding cannot be realized by relying solely on theory and gathering theoretical knowledge. To expand their spiritual understanding, human beings need to develop their celestial reason by applying the divine and moral precepts revealed by authentic messengers (B. Elahi, 1999). It is the application, not accumulation, of knowledge that leads to improvement and growth. In fact, the necessary steps that should be taken in the causal system for achieving true spiritual understanding are implementation and practice that culminates in experience (Anvar, 2012).

In Ostad Elahi's philosophy, spirituality is a coherent system subjected to the principle of causality according to which one must necessarily go through the appropriate causes in order to obtain something (B. Elahi, 1997). Causal laws are pre-established and immutable (B. Elahi, 1999) and it is only within the confines of these laws that things happen in the causal world. The natural development of the soul also requires sufficient knowledge of the causal principles that govern the spiritual domain (B. Elahi, 2005), and one needs to put these principles into practice to increase one's spiritual understanding.

The principle of causality is a fundamental aspect of Natural Spirituality and can be traced in all its other aspects. Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2007) suggests that spiritual students always consider this principle and be aware that in whatever happens to them the cause is within themselves. However, to look appropriately for the causes within, one is required to be also familiar with the principle of successive lives in the philosophy of Ostad Elahi where the current life of human beings is only a part of their existence.

6- The Principle of Ascending Successive Lives

Ostad Elahi, in his philosophy, raises the curtain on the principle of successive lives which is missing, as B. Elahi (1999) explains, only in the external facet of monotheistic faiths and rejected by the orthodoxies of the three great Abrahamic religions. The doctrine of ascending successive lives proposes that attaining the requisite experiences necessary for moving toward perfection is such an immense undertaking that it cannot usually be accomplished in a single earthly life (B. Elahi, 2005). Thus, the celestial soul needs to be placed in a cycle of successive lives to complete its educational stages.

According to this principle, every single life is a brief stage in the course of a long and complex journey. From its first entry into this world to the last phase of its successive lives, every soul has a fixed period of time during which it gets access to the required knowledge and the necessary elements to reach perfection, and it is up to the self to put these elements to good use (Comte, 2009). At the end of each life, the celestial soul takes the effects of that life with itself, and the conditions the soul will have in the next life – the body it takes and the environment in which the body is born and develops (B. Elahi, 2001) – is determined by the state of the soul and its needs for progressing in the path of perfection.

The principle of ascending successive lives is different from metempsychosis and all schools of transmigration – including the schools of metamorphosis, replacement, dissolution, and implantation (N. Elahi, 2007) – in many respects, particularly in that "successive rebirths follow a hierarchical direction toward perfection" (Anvar, 2012, p. 139). As the key to the process of perfection (B. Elahi, 2005), this principle refers to a system of precise spiritual laws that goes beyond a simple hypothesis of reincarnation (B. Elahi, 1999) and can answer many questions concerning divine justice.

The theory of ascending successive lives can provide a solution for the problematic notion of divine justice because it explains how the conditions of people at birth and the events that shape people's lives are the direct or indirect consequences of their action in their previous or present lives (Comte, 2009). Recognizing divine justice endows one with a feeling of peace (B. Elahi, 1999) and strengthens one's faith. Thus, the spiritual voyager moves more confidently in the path and communicates more effectively with the Source.

7- Communicating with the Source

The last, but not the least, key idea in Ostad Elahi's philosophy is communicating with the Source, since the task of self-perfection cannot be completed without assistance from God (B. Elahi, 2005) and this assistance is mostly provided through communication with Him. Divine assistance appears in the form of an energy which is "essential for the regulation and acceleration of osmotic exchanges in the self" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 51). This energy acts as "the catalyst required for the transformation of our celestial character units into divine virtues" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 52). Without divine assistance the celestial soul loses the control of osmotic exchanges of the self and the imperious self takes charge instead.

In order to connect to the Source and absorb this "metacausal exogenous energy" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 112) one needs to feel the presence and support of this infinitely benevolent entity when making decisions and try to act with the sole intention of obtaining His satisfaction (Comte, 2009). In fact, to synthesise celestial molecules, one needs to practice divine ethical principles in a disinterested manner and out of sheer duty. It is then that "the divine touch" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 113) intervenes and transforms celestial molecules into divine molecules that together form divine virtues.

The key idea of connecting with the Source is very much related to the notion of prayer on which a significant part of this thesis is built. Prayer is one the most effective ways of communicating with the Source, because it turns a believer's "receptor" toward the Source and in doing so enables him or her to receive divine energy (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 161). Thus, the meaning of prayer and the ways it can be performed in Ostad Elahi's philosophy is explained in more details in the next section.

Prayer

In Ostad Elahi's philosophy, prayer plays an important role in establishing an intimate relationship with God. It is a necessary part of spiritual practices because it is one of the ways to receive metacausal energy from the Source. Metacausal energy is a "purifying energy that is adapted to the inherent nature of our soul" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 31). This energy activates and energizes the soul, increases its radiance, and most importantly prevents its negligence and ignorance. By being attentive to the Source and gaining this "gravitational energy" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 31) of His guidance, spiritual travellers can make their soul lighter, stronger, and more luminous (B. Elahi, 2007).

At the elementary stages of one's spiritual development, in Natural Spirituality, any kind of conversation with God, even those that contain material requests, is permissible and even beneficial (B. Elahi, 2005). When spiritual travellers are in the initial levels of their journey, petitionary prayer helps them to strengthen their spiritual confidence (B. Elahi, 1993a) and their relationship with the Source. However, wanting material things from God is not looked upon favourably in Natural Spirituality.

As Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2009) explains, God has no need for humans' devotion. Spiritual students should worship God as their duty to attain God's grace, without expecting anything in return for their prayers. They should not look at spirituality as an insurance policy that preserves their interests and safeguards them from harm. Although human nature makes it impossible to truly not want anything, for prayer to result in the absorption of the metacausal energy, it is necessary to try and purify its content from any egoistic desire to the extent possible.

In Natural Spirituality, any desire, either material or spiritual, other than divine contentment is considered as a terrestrial desire of the ego. Examples of material desires are asking for wealth and comfort, or that one should never undergo anything unpleasant. Examples of egotistic spiritual desires can be having the expectation of being rewarded with a state of spiritual ecstasy whenever one prays, or acquiring some supernatural powers after spending some time on ascetic practices. These spiritual desires stem from the imperious self. It is important to know that spiritual travellers might in some occasions experience a supernatural phenomenon, and ecstasy might sometimes happen during a prayer. While such experiences may be considered as sublime spiritual experiences – because they are indicative of divine regard – one should never seek them while communicating with God.

The aim of prayer essentially is "to remember God and to come nearer to Him" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 178). One of the best ways of praying in Natural Spirituality is an exercise known as attention-dialogue (N. Elahi, 1994) in which attention refers to delving within and concentrating on God, and dialogue refers to having an intimate spiritual conversation with Him. In Ostad Elahi's system of thought the place one needs to look for God, is one's own heart (B. Elahi, 2007). That is why during prayers human beings need to delve within; and to have an uninterrupted conversation with Him one needs to address God directly and consider Him present.

In practicing the exercise of attention-dialogue, one should be mindful. To preserve the intimacy with God during prayer, one should not just recite some memorised sentences. "One's heart must be aware and attentive" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 179) and those who pray must understand and truly mean each word that they speak. In prayer, the intention should be constantly examined and praying needs to be performed with sincerity and humility. Listening to spiritual music while praying can also predispose the soul to better connect with God. Music helps the soul's communion with the Source becomes more intense (B. Elahi, 1993a) and a prayer that is accompanied with spiritual music has greater spiritual effect and is more delightful for the soul.

Ostad Elahi called attention to the unity of religious truth and encourages the spiritual travellers not to miss an occasion to pray when they confront people of different faith gathered for praying (B. Elahi, 2009). Therefore, one can join to pray with people of other faiths if they are welcome. The exercise of attention-dialogue can be performed in any special place for prayer – like mosques, churches, or temples – if one feels it helps with the concentration or fervour.

In Natural Spirituality, the main goal of all exercises is gaining a better knowledge of the self, and the exercise of attention-dialogue is not an exception. However, prayer alone, even if it is done with attention and concentration, does not result to self-knowledge unless it is accompanied by reflection, action and invocation (B. Elahi, 2009). All of the qualities that one attributes or ascribes to God in a prayer, one must practice, cultivate, and act upon oneself (B. Elahi, 1995). That is, for example, when one refers to God as gracious and compassionate, one needs to be gallant and gracious toward one's fellow beings. It is this kind of prayer that keeps one from indecent behaviour, prevents one from becoming negligent, inspires one with that which is consistent with divine contentment, and eventually leads one to a better knowledge of one's self.

The exercise of attention-dialogue, if practiced attentively and regularly and is coupled by action, leads one to the state of constant attention. In the state of constant attention, prayer is in the form of "natural meditation" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 164) in which spiritual students keep reminding themselves that God is always present and observant, and they are never without His support. Natural meditation "does not require achieving a particular physical state or performing any physical exercises or specific techniques" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 164). To perform natural meditation, spiritual students should only try to always align their conduct with the voice of their conscience or seek God's contentment in their decisions. When constant attention becomes spiritual students' second nature, God's presence is always in their preconscious, even while their conscious self is tending to daily affairs. As such, each time they recall God, they feel that the flux of His benevolent power encompasses them. That is why with natural meditation they enjoy greater inner serenity and reliance, and divine virtues are more easily developed within them.

Given that people do not really have sufficient knowledge of themselves, they can never be sure of the real reasons for their actions and decisions, even when they think they are attentive. It is difficult to know, for example, if one prays with the pure intention of getting closer to the Source, or if one is truly in a state of humility or sincerity. However, in Ostad Elahi's system of thought it is emphasised that what God expects from human beings is only making an effort. With practice and perseverance, spiritual students can gradually overcome their ego and reach a point where the attribute of magnanimity is gradually cultivated within them and they are no longer subjugated to material attachments.

In higher stages of prayer, the worshippers can reach a state where the presence of God will become distinct for them and they will grow to be fully aware of their self. In a stage after that, truth seekers become so totally absorbed by feelings of joy and wonder during their prayer that they forget their self, begin to "swim joyfully in the ocean of the divine 'Unicity'" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 182), and their souls will be joined with God.

Prayer and Miracles

Prayer can be followed by miracles. Natural Spirituality affirms "the efficacy of prayer to alter the course of events, to transform beings from within, and to influence individual and collective destinies" (Anvar, 2012, p. 67). If people, in difficult situations, invoke God "with the same anguish and heartfelt excitement as that of a person stranded in the middle of the ocean on a sinking boat" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 162), God will respond to them. In some of such situations, supernatural things might happen that cannot be explained by material science – for example, an apparently incurable illness might be suddenly cured without any premeditation.

Faith has a significant role in the occurrence of miracles. It activates "the operative power of prayer" (Anvar, 2012, p. 67) by attracting God's attention and absorbing divine energy. In this regard, a group prayer is even more effective in being led to a miracle because the divine particles that exist in human beings are accumulated by the number of the people who pray and attract an immense amount of divine energy. Thus, if a group of believers pray with united hearts and a common goal, "they can actually perform a miracle" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 146). Such phenomena sometimes take place in certain pilgrimage sites where a group of united people pray.

While miracles could attract the attention of human beings toward the Source in the past, they are not as effective at present (B. Elahi, 2005). As the mentality of people has changed, miracles no longer motivate people to engage with religion and spirituality or to have faith in God. Today, human beings rely more on reason than emotion, and need to understand to be convinced (B. Elahi, 2005). People can no longer blindly follow in the footsteps of the saints. They need to know about their ultimate goal, and the how and the why of the journey before they commit themselves to a spiritual path (B. Elahi, 1993a).

Once spiritual voyagers learn about the how and the why of their journey, they wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to gain self-knowledge and divine knowledge. As they practice ethical principles in different situations and expand their field of perception, they begin to see the change that occur to their reactions and their system of thought; and witnessing the modifications that happen in their consciousness, they want nothing except to develop further in their spiritual path. Indeed, if the very essence and purpose of a miracle is "to permeate the heart and awaken the soul" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 148), every step of progress seems a miracle to a spiritual voyager. Advanced spiritual travellers do not look for or ask for miracles, simply because they constantly *live* in a miracle (B. Elahi, 1993a).

Prayer and Surrender to God

In higher stages of spirituality, spiritual students "strive to be satisfied with the way things turn out" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 180), especially when things do not turn out as they wish. At the stage of surrender, when spiritual students confront a situation that is out of the zone of their free will, they try to look at the unfavourable event from another perspective and search for reasons for the thing that has happened. They try to act in keeping with the law of divine trust that says "when we place ourselves in God's hands, whatever happens to us is for our own good, be it pleasant or unpleasant" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 40). In other words, they try to see things through God and let God judge what is right for them. They also regard such situations as divine tests and make an effort to pass through their tests and trials with patience and surrender (B. Elahi, 1993a).

To completely understand and truly assimilate the law of divine trust, spiritual voyagers must practice it by sincerely relying on God in all circumstances (B. Elahi, 1999) in every unpleasant situation, in the same way that children wholeheartedly rely on their mother. They must trust God to the greatest degree and become certain that divine providence is always concerned with improvement and protection of them (B. Elahi, 2005). They need to be sure that everything that happens, happens for a reason.

Spiritual students are supposed to love God for what He is. They should worship God and seek to get closer to Him, not because they want Him to do something for them but because He is deserving of adoration and praise (B. Elahi, 1993a). In their prayers, thus, what spiritual travellers need to ask God is to help them remain on the right path and for God to be content with them: "O God, I want only You, nothing but You. Help me to do whatever You wish, what You love for me to do" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 181).

The Utility of Faith

Faith, in Natural Spirituality, can be translated as believing "sincerely and firmly in the true God" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 31) where the true God is "the God known in His truth and not as we imagine Him to be" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 31). Faith is a crucial element in the process of self-perfection, as it has a direct influence on the development of celestial reason. It enables human beings to have access to both divine warmth and divine light, which are necessary for the maturation of their celestial reason, and provides the appropriate nutrition for the growth and development of the soul. Here, the divine warmth provides the motivation for the travellers' movements on the path, and divine light helps the travellers to get the necessary knowledge.

Spiritual knowledge, which is a type of "active awareness" (Morris, 2007, p. 2), is limitless. Those who actively apply ethical principles in their own experiences constantly make new discoveries as they advance (J. During, 1993) and expand their knowledge. Thus, the knowledge that one receives through divine light refers to the French word *connaissance* that, as opposed to *savoir*, encompasses a broad range of true inner knowing (B. Elahi, 1993a) and cannot be gained without having sincere faith in the Source.

Faith is not something to dispute, to explain or to imitate (B. Elahi, 1993a). People need to find it within themselves. It is a gift or a talent that is given to everyone, but like any other talents it cannot develop if one does not cultivate it (B. Elahi, 1997). It also needs careful attention and safe keeping. Faith is received "as an animating spiritual energy" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 158). This active energy, which by its very nature tends to dissipate, can be hold together only by one's sincerity towards God. In fact, the luminous energy of faith must be reinforced by actual spiritual practice (B. Elahi, 1993a).

In Natural Spirituality, there are a few general and fundamental rules that spiritual students should accept and follow. A "flawless faith" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 83) in Ostad Elahi's philosophy is to believe in eternal life and the other world, to believe in the Unique God who is all-powerful, all-merciful and compassionate, and to believe that for every being there is an accounting and a destination which is returning to the Source of its creation.

In order to have faith in any system, one needs to experiment to verify the validity of its laws. Although it might not be feasible to verify all the laws in a system, people can have faith in that system if they conduct a sufficient number of conclusive experiments. Therefore, spiritual students need to immerse themselves in spiritual experimentation to grow their faith, otherwise their faith remains abstract and their reliance on God stays merely verbal (B. Elahi, 1999).

The Process of Assimilating Ethical Principles

According to Ostad Elahi's philosophy, human beings undertake their process of spiritual perfection to attain an "infini-dimensional perception" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 51). When souls come to earth, they experience a form of unconsciousness such that they do not know who they are, where they have come from, or where they are going. The only way human beings can achieve that infini-dimensional perception is to delve within to regain consciousness (B. Elahi, 2001) of their selves. The process of delving within is known as a cognitive process in Ostad Elahi's philosophy, through which human beings can gradually come to know the depths of their unconscious psyche. What makes this task difficult is the existence of "an opaque veil" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 51) in their psychospiritual organism that disconnects them from their self.

The opaque veil originates from "a functional disequilibrium" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 51) within human beings' character units. The imbalanced character units usually manifest themselves in the form of functional impairments of the psychospiritual organism such as selfishness, ostentation, pride, despair, obsession, anxiety, diffidence, anger, or pathological jealousy. To resolve the disequilibrium in their character units, human beings need to identify and fight against the imbalances in their psychospiritual organism and assimilate divine ethical principles to gain "functional equilibrium" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 52).

To describe the process through which human beings' psychospiritual organism assimilates a divine ethical principle, B. Elahi (2001) makes an analogy between the physical organism and the psychospiritual organism and explains that ethical principles assimilate in human's soul the same way nutrients assimilate in human's body. Nutrients in human's body go through four phases in order to be assimilated: ingestion, digestion, absorption, and assimilation. In the phase of ingestion, food enters the digestive tract. In the phase of digestion, the ingested food is broken down by digestive enzymes. In the phase of absorption, the nutrients are absorbed through the intermediary of the digestive tract and enter the circulatory system, where they are put into contact with the cells. And in the phase of assimilation, the cells select the nutrients according to their individual needs and assimilate them. In a similar manner, a human psychospiritual organism assimilates a divine ethical principle in four phases: attention, reflection, memorization, and assimilation. In the phase of attention, an ethical principle is acknowledged. In the phase of reflection, human beings intellectually analyse the principle and reflect on the means of practicing it. In the phase of memorization, the principle is stored in human memory to be applied as soon as the occasion presents itself. And the fourth phase – assimilation – involves repeatedly practicing the principle until it becomes a divine virtue within human beings.

Assimilation in the physical organism is "the process through which the cell transforms the nutrients it has absorbed into its own constitutive substance" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 53). Just the same, the psychospiritual organism needs to turn celestial molecules to something with divine substance. Each time human beings practice an ethical principle and succeed, their psychospiritual organism synthesises "celestial molecules" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 55). If they practice that principle for long enough and synthesise enough celestial molecules for the ethical principle, the Source "confers His Touch on the corresponding character unit" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 55) and that characteristic will transform into a divine virtue.

In the first two phases of the process of assimilating ethical principles, education of thought plays an important role. In the first phase of the process (attention), education of thought acts as an efficient filter for selecting and retaining an idea, and helps human beings to determine what they should focus their attention on. In the second phase (reflection), education of thought acts as the digestive enzymes in the process of digestion in the body. Just as specific enzymes are needed to digest a particular food, it is necessary to have a "correct educational foundation" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 54) to analyse the benefits of a virtue more profoundly, determine the means of cultivating it, and gauge whom it should be directed towards and to what extent.

Just like the physical organism needs energy to synthesise protein, the psychospiritual organism needs metacausal energy to be able to synthesise celestial molecules. The necessary metacausal energy for the process of assimilating ethical principles is achieved when human beings turn their intentions to attract divine satisfaction while practicing an ethical principle (B. Elahi, 2001). For example, human beings need to force themselves to perform certain altruistic acts that counter their selfishness to be able to gain the metacausal energy necessary to assimilate the principle of altruism.

It is important to know that, according to Ostad Elahi's philosophy, intention has such an important role in assimilating ethical principles that in certain circumstances it can count as the act itself. The effect of having a firm intention to carry out an act on the psychospiritual organism is equivalent to that of an accomplishing it (B. Elahi, 2001). For example, if people truly try to assist someone in distress but are prevented from doing so for reasons beyond their control, their intention will nevertheless have the same nutritional value as if they had succeeded to assist that person.

Three Different Types of Intentions

As B. Elahi (2001) explains, there are three main types of intentions in the practice of ethical principles: metacausal, causal, and causo-metacausal (pp. 57-58). A metacausal intention is when one practices an ethical principle as a duty with the goal of attracting divine satisfaction. Such an intention contains metacausal energy and captures divine light. One's intention is causal when one practices ethical principles with the goal of self-satisfaction and gaining a causal benefit like power, wealth, material honours, or even pleasures of the other world like paradise. One's intention is causo-metacausal when one thinks that one is practicing ethics with the goal of attracting divine satisfaction, but in reality what one is seeking is the satisfaction of one's own desires.

It is important for spiritual travellers to be aware that it is almost impossible to fully know their intentions. As I explained before, people do not have sufficient knowledge of themselves and they can never be sure of the real reasons behind their actions and decisions (see also page 200). However, people can purify their intention to the extent that they can, and use self-suggestion to have a metacausal intention (B. Elahi, 2001).

Natural Spirituality and Spiritual Students

In Ostad Elahi's philosophy, to undertake the process of self-perfection and develop the celestial reason, it is necessary to consider spirituality as a science and adopt the mindset of a student. Spiritual students are those who are enthusiastic for understanding "the Truth" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 219) and search for a deeper meaning in life. Ostad Elahi's system of thought resembles a "spiritual university" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 198) whose students should assiduously practice some pragmatic points in an organized fashion in order to advance successfully in their education. These points can be itemised as:

- considering this earthly life as a place of education for the life beyond
- trying to have constant attention to the Source in daily life
- observing rights and duties to the extent possible
- respecting moral and civil laws
- seeking divine satisfaction in decision making
- trying to have a metacausal intention while practicing ethical principles
- constantly battling the imperious self
- striving to be active, responsible and beneficial in social life

The above points form Natural Spirituality, which is a spirituality that is adapted to both the true metaphysical nature of human beings and the mentality of the modern world (B. Elahi, 2001). It is a type of spirituality that is universal, because the principles that govern the growth and development of human beings' character units are not bound by time and place, and people with different cultural and intellectual backgrounds can benefit from it.

Gender Neutral

It is important to indicate again that there is no difference between men and women in the spiritual university. Ostad Elahi, in his teachings, addressed all human beings regardless of their gender. The Persian language has no gender-specific personal pronouns in the third person singular. When Bahram Elahi translated his father's oral teachings to French, he chose to use masculine pronouns for third person singular. However, as he explains at the beginning of one of his books, wherever masculine pronouns are used in his publications, they are to be considered in their neutral sense (B. Elahi, 1997; 1999; 2001; 2005). I request that readers remember this when, in my analyses, I cite from Bahram Elahi's books.

My Position in the Spiritual University

As I explained above, Natural Spirituality has a scientific approach to spirituality and emphasises rational thinking. Regarding myself as a spiritual student I have always attempted to understand a principle before I practice it. I asked myself if practicing a spiritual rule could affect anything in my life negatively, or if I disregarded someone's right by my practices. Until today, in my path of self-knowledge, I have never been confronted with any principle in Ostad Elahi's philosophy that I disliked or disagreed with. However, due to my limited field of perception, there were many principles that I could not understand or I could not practice in the right way. I explain in the discussion chapters (see pages 130-131, 158, 211-217) how I put question marks next to the confusing theoretical subjects and how I dealt with them later in my practices. I had faith in the system, but I never considered my faith as a naïve allegiance to Ostad Elahi's teachings.

I discussed in Chapter 1 that it is possible to believe in a system of thought without understanding all of its theoretical knowledge. My belief in Natural Spirituality began as an experimental-logical faith; nevertheless, I could always see its emotional features. An example for the emotional aspect of my faith was that I constructed a personalised God with whom I could deeply connected. While I strongly believed that there was only one God, I imagined a face for that faceless Being during my prayers. My personalised God resembled a caring and supportive father-friend who accompanied me everywhere I went and encouraged me to pursue my dreams.

A reason that I made a face for God might be that my thoughts and thinking usually were shaped in images. A reason for choosing a male figure as my God might be that my mentality was under the influence of the patriarchal society I was living in. Even as a child I imagined God as a man (see page 125). But, no matter what the reasons were for making that image, my personalised God remained one of the most significant aspects of my faith; and thus, in this thesis, I chose to refer to gender-neutral God with a masculine pronoun.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

This chapter reviews aspects of research that contribute to the expanding field of spirituality and autoethnography. In order to follow a structured argument (Hart, 2000) and cover the relevant literature in an orderly manner, the review is divided into three parts. In the first part, I compare some current definitions of spirituality, examine the relationship and differences between spirituality and religion, and discuss key figures of spirituality in different fields, especially in the context of Australia.

Parallel to the structure of theoretical framework, in the second part of this chapter I introduce literature on the notions of mysticism, prayer and contemplation, and faith, as they are the key subjects and main themes in my autoethnographic analysis. I explore the meanings of these concepts in different contexts and clarify the definition I consider for each concept in my arguments in discussion chapters.

Since autoethnography is the methodology adopted for this thesis, in the last part of the chapter I review the research that has been carried out on spiritualty with narrative approaches, with particular emphasis on autoethnographic accounts. I also explain how the methods used by some well-known autoethnographers have influenced my analysis in this study.

This research is an autoethnography and demands an autoethnographic literature review. Although I tried to distance myself from the literature in the field, I have remained an autoethnographer and sometimes expressed my thoughts and feelings when I have introduced the literature that has influenced my work. This is obvious when I mention key figures in spirituality and in autoethnography and explain what aspect of their research has influenced my interpretations and explanations in the discussion chapters.

Spirituality

Many researchers argue that spirituality is not easy to define. This is perhaps because spirituality is a part of people's non-verbal communication system (Berryman, 2001), or because it "eludes the kind of rationalistic knowing that arrives at simple definitions" (Tacey, 2000, p. 17). Some researchers reason that definitions for spirituality remain elusive and imprecise (Poe, 2005) because in the past decades it has been defined in a postmodern context, "where the transcendent has been bracketed, where the subject has been called into question, and where there is a degree of suspicion about almost everything – except the suspicion itself" (Scott, 2001, p. 118). Then there are other researchers (Erricker & Erricker, 2016) who link the difficulty of defining spirituality to the plurality of understanding of the term and its diverse facets and expressions. Spirituality, like all interesting words, might defy definition (Hay & Nye, 1996), and it is impossible to find a comprehensive definition for spirituality that include all its aspects. However, researchers provide their own definition of the term in their research to be able to support their discussions and arguments. I begin the review of literature on spirituality by comparing some contemporary definitions.

Definitions for Spirituality

There is no universal essence of spirituality except for a common assumption that says "there is more to life than the material" (Copley, 2000, p. 5). Definitions for spirituality, nevertheless, always go further than this assumption and provide more details. Spirituality in current research is also approached in inter-disciplinary ways and is linked to different concepts including wellbeing, quests for unity, connectedness, mindfulness, aesthetics, creativity, morality, self-knowledge and self-development (Erricker & Erricker, 2016).

Spirituality, therefore, is defined with differing opinions and each definition highlights only one or some of spirituality's diverse facets to fit in the discipline where it is defined (Bone, 2007; Hume & McPhillips, 2006). Categorising these definitions is a challenging task not only because the literature on spirituality "is full of taken for granted assumptions" (Bone & Fenton, 2015, p. 89) but also because spirituality is often context sensitive and its definitions can be interpreted differently in various contexts.

In order to have a system to review and compare some of the definitions for spirituality, I sort them thematically into three groups: definitions that emphasise on the moral aspect of spirituality, definitions that concentrate on the aspects of connectedness and meaning-making, and definitions that look at spirituality as the experience of the transcendent.

Spirituality and morality. Spirituality is sometimes linked to morality, cultivating the soul through selflessness, integrity, and self-control. In this context spirituality can be defined as a means for self-development, living with dignity, and being helpful and beneficial to others in society. For example, Palmer (2003), in his essay on the role of spirituality in teacher education, defines spirituality as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" (p. 377). Massoudi (2003) also emphasises the moral aspect of spirituality and in an essay that investigates the relationships between creativity and spirituality defines spirituality as "a sense of compassion, nonviolence, truthfulness, loving kindness, being connected to the whole, and living a simple peaceful harmonious life" (p. 118). Defined as above, spirituality can help people not only to develop their selves morally but also contribute to make the world a better place to live.

Human attributes such as being compassionate, being brave and resilient in difficulties, being truthful and forgiving, being supportive and protective, and being generous have always been valued and have been called heroic attributes since the Middle Ages (Ranulf, 1970). Many researchers still focus on these attributes when they investigate spirituality, refer to these attributes as spiritual, and discuss their influence on developing morality and integrity. Copely (2000), for example, whose research is about spirituality in the education system of England and Wales, contended that "the appeal of the heroic in history lessons was a pointer towards the spiritual life" (p. 83). In this context, a spiritual life is a life that is spent on self-development and cultivating the soul to become a selfless and supportive being.

Moral attributes have usually been an important aspect of spiritual education in different contexts; however, according to Spohn (1997), who researches spirituality and ethics, spirituality often goes beyond morality, especially when it is associated with meaning making, connectedness and life purposes.

Spirituality, meaning making, and connectedness. Researching civility and spirituality, Fried (2001) has focused on the meaning making aspect of spirituality and defined it as "the ability to experience connections and to create meaning in one's life" (p. 268). From this perspective, spirituality can be related to the purpose of human beings in the world and be seen as a source of connection (de Souza, 2012; 2016). It can be a force that "connects people to each other, to all living things, to nature and the universe" (Bone, 2007, p. 8). It can also help people to dismiss the life tensions caused by estrangement (Walker, 2006), look at all things as a part of themselves and relate to them more compassionately and with a healing approach.

Sometimes spirituality is defined in social contexts and is linked to different aspects of social life. In research about the spiritual writings of adolescent girls, Sinats et al. (2005) decided not to define spirituality at the beginning of their research in order for their participants to feel free to bring forward anything from their diaries that could indicate spirituality. After gathering data, they agreed upon a definition that could fit into all the pieces of writing they gathered. The resulting definition encompassed a wide range of social concepts including justice, social responsibilities, preserving sensitivity, nurturing voice, making connections beyond the self, and taking care of self in relation to others. Their definition illustrated that spirituality could be seen as an inseparable part of social life that "appears to be woven into and part of living and growing" (Sinats et al., 2005, p. 19).

With such definitions, spirituality can not only be related to meaningfulness and purposefulness of life and connectedness to all beings, but it can also be traced to almost every aspect of life in a society. However, spirituality sometimes goes further than this when it is seen as a quest for gaining knowledge of one's spiritual personality and becoming united with the transcendent.

Spirituality and the experience of the transcendent. Spirituality usually stands in comparison with matter and is associated to concepts that go beyond the limitations of the material world, and goals that concern more than material satisfaction (Sheldrake, 2012). In this context, it might be seen as a "noncorporal aspect of each human being that is separate from the mind" (Clark, 2001, p. 38). Discussing cultivation of spiritual reflectivity in teachers, Mayes (2001) also defined spirituality as "the pursuit of trans-personal and trans-temporal reality" (p. 6) to refer to the state of going beyond materiality.

Bento (2000) defined spirituality as "the experience of transcendent" (p. 653) in research about spirituality in relation to leadership. In a management and business context, Lewis and Geroy (2000) defined spirituality as "the inner experience of the individual when he or she senses a beyond" (p. 684). When the beyond or transcendent is translated as The Omnipotent, The Source, The Ultimate or God (Astley, 2017), spirituality is connected to and compared with religion. The relationship between spirituality and religion is controversial. In order for me to build a working definition of spirituality, I needed to investigate the debates on their differences and their relationship.

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality sometimes deals with concepts that are close to those discussed in religions. Although many people make a clear distinction between spirituality and religion, there are notions that bind the two. There are some researchers who, by emphasising the primary principles of religions, argue that there is no difference between the two and see spirituality as the internal facet of all religions.

Until relatively recently spirituality was subsumed under the genre of religion and was often associated with the dogmatism religion was assumed to imply (Erricker & Erricker, 2016). Now, in many contexts, religion is regarded as a part of the big circle of spirituality (Baskin, 2016; Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Rassool, 2000), as almost all religious people see themselves as spiritual, although not all spiritual people consider themselves to be religious (Gilley, 2005). There are also secularists who do not see themselves as religious but come to recognise that they have some deeply held spiritual beliefs that frame their intellectual work (Poe, 2005).

Even when spirituality is defined as "the search for the sacred" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 366), it can be separated from religion. The word sacred may cover a wide range of concepts from human perception of the divine to any other aspect of life that can be perceived as significant. According to some researchers, in religion the sacred most usually is involved with an organised entity (Tanyi, 2002) and the search for the sacred only "occurs within the context of established institutions" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 366); while spirituality offers a broader domain for the sacred.

The existence of a broad range of understandings for spiritual notions leads to the main argument about the differences between spirituality and religion, where religion is considered as a structured form of spirituality (Baskin, 2016; Tisdell, 2008). Hay and Nye (1996; 2006), who have contributed significantly to the research literature about spirituality in their study on children's spirituality in the United Kingdom, also see religion as a structure. They contend that religion, unlike spirituality, tends to be associated with what is publicly available, such as churches, mosques and temples, holy books and prayer books, religious officials, and religious ceremonies like weddings and funerals. However, spirituality is more personal and private (see also Bone, 2010b; King, 2009).

Religion is specifically seen under the umbrella term of spirituality when spirituality is divided into two broad groups of religious spirituality and non-religious spirituality. In an introduction to his collection of essays on spirituality and higher education in the United States of America, Speck (2005) categorised different forms of spirituality into spirituality with God and spirituality without God. In Speck's (2005) categorization, spirituality without God was defined in a closed system of natural order, while spirituality with God posited spirituality in both natural and supernatural realms in which "the supernatural realm is ontologically primary" (p. 9).

Although Speck's (2005) category helps in drawing a distinction between different forms of spirituality and clarifying their relation to religion, there still remains some ambiguities which make the borders between spirituality and religion blurry. The root of these ambiguities is mainly in definitions. Some words that are used in the field of spirituality – like transcendent, sacred and divine – are as elusive as the term spirituality itself and are used with different meanings in various contexts. Alternatively, there are similar concepts that have different definitions. As an example of such concepts, one might refer to the idea of God. According to B. Elahi (1997), many of those who deny the existence of God are either rejecting a certain representation of God that is founded on inaccurate interpretations, or criticising the legitimacy of the individuals whose "appalling actions" (p. 20) are committed in the name God. In many societies today, terms like God, monotheism, religion, sin, punishment, and reward have been turned away from their original meaning, and have become so "loaded with misleading connotations that it is difficult for most people to accept them" (During, 1993, p. x).

Therefore, in many definitions of spirituality, even those that deny God, a word like transcendent might be translated as God, and one may be able to find divine faith in some closed systems of natural order. Alex Grey, a world renowned visionary artist, once said in an interview (Brown, 2005): "even though Buddhists would not use the word 'God', the nondual nature of mind, voidness, clarity, and infinite compassion, as described in the Buddhist teachings, is not different than the experience that I call God" (p. 259). In his book on postsecularism, King (2009) also asserts that sometimes borderlines between spirituality and religion cannot be clearly drawn because there might be a person whose spirituality looks just like a systematised religion, while "a conventional-seeming religionist may pursue a very solitary kind of inward spirituality" (p. 14).

In spite of the differences between spirituality and religion, sometimes they are both regarded as things to fear in secular societies (Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007). Some people – whose ideology is fuelled by the disapproval of religious violence – are so put off by both religion and spirituality that it is impossible to have a meaningful discussion with them (Gilley, 2005; Hay & Nye, 2006; King, 2009). In any supposed discussion, such people immediately refer to terrorizing children with guilt, threats of eternal damnation in Catholicism, and the subjugation of women – including the legality of child brides – in Islamic sharia law (Coyne, 2015). However, as Pargament (1999) in his research on the psychology of religion and spirituality observed, spirituality in secular societies is becoming more agreeable as an individual expression that supports the greatest of human capacities. In other words, while religion is related to narrow-mindedness and links with fanaticism and intolerance, spirituality is becoming associated more with concepts like inspiration, love, depth, wholeness and connectedness (Bone, Cullen, Loveridge, 2007; Hay & Nye, 2006).

Spirituality is currently more acceptable than religion in secular societies, but the holistic notion of spirituality still "leaves open a religious understanding of the word" (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 22). It might be possible that by gaining authentic spiritual knowledge people will be able to better distinguish religions made by men and avoid extremists who might attempt to manipulate minds (for example, see Allen, 1999). However, in order to realise that possibility, applying a critical thinking approach to religious studies, spiritual education, and personal choices of a spiritual path becomes essential. In this thesis, critical thinking is considered as the skill of thinking based on reasoning and avoiding biased judgements (Aden, 2013; Ahmad, 2017; Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Gary, 2006; Watts, 2017).

Spirituality and Critical Thinking

Many researchers consider freedom of choice and critical thinking crucial in following certain spiritual paths. Researching personal identity in the context of children's spirituality, R. S. Webster (2005) encourages critical thinking by dividing spirituality into authentic and inauthentic domains. R. S. Webster (2005) maintains that unlike inauthentic spirituality that leads individuals to understand themselves and the purpose of life through blindly following public frameworks, authentic spirituality is based on freedom of choice and "involves one's coming to understand how meanings and frameworks are to count for one's own situation, and then to take ownership of this" (p. 11). In an interview with Halford (1999), Nel Noddings – the American educationalist who is best known for her work in ethics of care – also emphasised critical thinking in spirituality and suggested that today both believers and unbelievers ought to be mindful and try their best to clarify for themselves what they have or have not accepted. Noddings (2005), in the second edition of her book *The challenge to care in schools*, elaborated on the importance of critical thinking in studies of religions and emphasised developing critical thinking in educational programs.

Another American educationalist who has discussed the importance of critical thinking in education is Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as her pen name bell hooks. hooks (2010) pictures a curious child at the beginning of her book, *Teaching critical thinking*, by describing a snapshot of herself at the age of three or four concentrating intensely on a book in her hand, calling the picture "a portrait of the intellectual as a young girl" (p. 7). Connecting children's curiosity to the concept of critical thinking, hooks (2010) maintains that spiritual thinking should be a form of critical thinking, performed with openness and "conscious mindfulness" (hooks, 2010, p. 150), to be able to lead to spiritual growth.

Many scholars in the past decade have recommended critical approaches in studies of spirituality and religion (Aden, 2013; Ahmad, 2017; Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Gary, 2006; Watts, 2017). F. Gardner (2011), for example, in her book entitled *Critical spirituality* suggests "critical social theory" (p. 47) as a suitable approach for exploring spirituality. This approach pays attention to cultural and legal systems of every society and provides a critical perspective for expressing suitable spiritual values in different cultures. With this critical approach, researchers can have their own expression of spirituality without damaging someone else's spiritual belief, and spirituality might be able to get further away from dogmatism and find a more researchable place in social science.

A review of definitions of spirituality suggests that there is "no common set of defining characteristics universally transferable or recognized" (Boero et al., 2005, p. 916). However, to distinguish various kinds of spirituality one can look at their origin, their true goal, and their means and methods. To get a working definition for spirituality, I briefly explore major currents of spirituality as explained by Bahram Elahi (1999), the researcher guiding this thesis.

Three Major Currents of Spirituality

According to B. Elahi (1999), different forms of spirituality can be broadly categorized into three major currents: classical spirituality, strayed spirituality, and natural spirituality. Classical or traditional spirituality is the spirituality that the great saints and mystics of different religions practiced in the past, and there are people who continue practicing its approaches today. It originates from the Source and most people who practice it "seek self-purification and divine proximity" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 21).

The followers of such spirituality focus on their quest for divine love, usually separate themselves from their social lives, and aim to reach the truth using traditional methods like praying, fasting, retreat, and abstinence. Although these methods were useful for the truth seekers of the past and helped them to progress spiritually, B. Elahi (1999) maintains that it is not efficient for people of the modern world with active social lives.

Strayed spirituality is a spirituality whose purpose, directly or indirectly, is about material gain and satisfaction of the ego. This kind of spirituality takes on many different forms, but it often imitates the external aspects of classical spirituality. The method used by followers is usually paraspiritual techniques, which "intoxicate the soul in the same way that stimulants or anesthetics affect the body" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 23). B. Elahi (1999) named credulity and ignorance as two important factors that explain why human beings are attracted to strayed spirituality, as they get fooled by its ruses, psychological manipulations, or the displays of different paranormal powers like mindreading and prophecy. However, no matter how attractive it seems, strayed spirituality is not helping human beings to reach truth or self-knowledge, and according to B. Elahi (1999) is highly damaging for the spiritual health of those who become its victims.

Natural spirituality is a kind of spirituality that "is practiced only out of a sense of human and spiritual duty for the sole purpose of attracting divine satisfaction" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 21). It focuses mostly on self-knowledge and is suitable for people with an active life in a modern society. Education of thought and ethical practice play important roles in this kind of spirituality. Followers need to observe both their own and others' rights at all times. In natural spirituality meditation mainly appears in the form of "Natural Meditation" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 25), in which the followers should always consciously think about doing the right thing in every situation and then force themselves to do so.

Thus, all physicians who treat their patients conscientiously, all honest judges who do not succumb to pressures and temptations, all students who study with the intention of being beneficial members of society, responsible parents who work hard to help their children understand ethical qualities, and all those who help people in need are "in a state of natural meditation" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 165) as long as they act in accordance with their conscience.

Spirituality has many different forms. Perhaps as Bone (2010a), influenced by Derrida, suggests, the word spirituality should become plural and multiple and appear as "spiritualities" (p. 402). The ambiguities in definitions make it difficult to differentiate between various forms of spirituality. However, the above criterion facilitates the way one can investigate the definitions and find out how similar some forms of spirituality are. Doing so, one can see that while some forms of spirituality are indeed different, even contradictory, there are some that seem different only on the surface. If studied away from dogmatism, many apparent differences in spiritualities might disappear where one finds similarities in their goal and their impact on human's spiritual substance. To build my working definition for spirituality I use this categorization and explain how my definition sits within the category of natural spirituality.

My Working Definition for Spirituality

Although I am interested in and inspired by many definitions of spirituality, specifically those that I reviewed in primary sections of this Chapter, my working definition in this research is constructed mainly based on Ostad Elahi's explanation of Natural Spirituality (B. Elahi, 2005).

Natural Spirituality, which was explained in detail in Chapter 2, sits in the third category among the three major currents of spirituality mentioned above, and is situated amid spiritualities with God (Speck, 2005). In Ostad Elahi's Natural Spirituality, one needs to take an approach that calls for "reason and individual will" to progress in the path of self-perfection. Thus, in this thesis I define spirituality as

> *the most significant aspect of life that deals with self-knowledge and divine knowledge, the process of maturation of the soul, and the journey toward the Beloved. It resembles an educational process in a university where the students learn to develop divine principles in themselves, educate their thought by critical thinking, and are evaluated based on their intentions while making decisions and their efforts in fighting the imperious self.*

In my definition of spirituality, I have tried to highlight concepts of self-knowledge, education of thought and having an active life in the society. Although spirituality is generally considered as private and personal (Bone, 2010b; King, 2009), many researchers contend that it should never be individualistic (Costello, 2016) as a spiritual traveller most often keeps the connection and interdependence with other people in the world. Even the most personal spirituality can be pursued in society and in relation to others. Those who choose to do so usually move beyond knowing about spirituality and take steps to become spiritual (Neiman, 2000) by practicing ethical principles in society. My idea of a spiritual ideology also maintains that spiritual progress can only be obtained by being mindful in every moment to pass the tests that frequently occur in the interactions of social life.

I continue this section about spirituality literature by reviewing some key figures in the field of spirituality. These are the researchers who are known for their ideas in their special discipline and influenced me the most in my research.

My Key Figures in Spirituality

Spirituality is becoming a legitimate concern in many disciplines and the literature in the field of spirituality is growing rapidly (Erricker & Erricker, 2016). Spiritual researchers communicate with and get connected to each other by presenting their research in conferences and publishing books, book chapters and journal articles. The number of handbooks and companions in different disciplines that include spirituality articles in their collections is also increasing, and spirituality articles are published in journals related to religious studies, nursing studies and both children and teacher education. When I started this research, in order to expand my knowledge on contemporary spirituality, I read articles written in many different fields, published in different places in the world. However, I gradually became selective and concentrated on the work of the researchers whose approach seemed more relevant to my thesis or more significant to my discussions.

From the United Kingdom I was mostly interested in writings of Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker. The collection of essays in *Spiritual education: Cultural, religious and social differences* (Erricker & Erricker, 2001) on the nature of spirituality and its implications for moral, religious and spiritual education, were specifically informative at the early stage of my research when I wanted to learn about spirituality discussions. The essays mostly informed me about interdisciplinary and intercultural conversations about spirituality and spiritual nature.

Also from the United Kingdom, Karen Armstrong's (2009) discussions on building a faith that can speak to the needs of the people in current time was also very inspiriting to me. I found many of her explanations about fundamentalism and misunderstanding the nature of God relevant to my arguments in this thesis.

In the context of America, I was interested in the writings of six influential spiritual researchers. I was influenced by the education theory (about caring) of Nel Noddings (1992; 2005), a historian of religion and the founder of the Charter for Compassion; by the research and collections of essays of Bruce Speck and Sherry Hoppe who research spirituality and higher education (Hoppe & Speck, 2005; Speck & Hoppe, 2007); by Parker Palmer, a prolific writer who focuses on issues in spiritualty, community, leadership, and specifically interesting to me, on spirituality and education (Palmer, 2003; 2017); by Elizabeth Tisdell (2003; 2008) whose research include spirituality and culture in adult learning, especially because in my autoethnographic research I look at my spiritual experiences with a cultural perspective; and by bell hooks who discusses spirituality in relations to gender, race and social class and emphasises critical thinking in education (hooks, 2010).

From Australia, I was mostly absorbed by the works of four spiritual researchers. The first two are Marian de Souza and Brendan Hyde. They mainly research children and young people's spirituality especially in primary schools. Much of my knowledge about the situation of spirituality in Australia, especially in the field of education, has been gathered from works of these two researchers.

I have also been greatly influenced by David Tacey among Australian spiritual researchers. He is a public intellectual and a researcher who is internationally known in spirituality studies. He specialised in the analytical psychology of Jung, discussing religious themes and archetypes that are found in myths, religions and folklore (Tacey, 2006; 2011). In his work, he also investigates indigenous culture (Tacey, 2010), the role of spirituality in adolescent and young people's education, and in general the function of religion in secular societies, exploring how to keep religious ideas authentic and open in the postmodern world (Tacey, 2000; 2003; 2012).

What made Tacey one of the most influential spiritual researchers to me is his interest in literature and symbolism (Tacey, 2015). His arguments on religion as a metaphor and his studies on deeper meanings of religious concepts – like miracles – most fascinated me and gave me an analytical tool for some parts of my thematic analysis.

The most influential Australian spiritual researcher to me was, without doubt, Jane Bone. Her research on ethics and spirituality is mostly focused on early childhood education (Bone, 2010b; 2014), but she also writes on spirituality and wellbeing, environmental issues (Bone, 2016), and relationships with animals (Bone, 2010a). Not only she influenced me by her idea of everyday spirituality (Bone, 2007) and her viewpoint of putting on a spiritual lens in everyday life (Bone, 2008), she also practically showed me how to live spiritually in different life situations and helped me in my efforts on understanding the Other. She is not only my supervisor in this research but an inspiring and motivating life mentor.

As an autoethnographer, I should begin with where I am. A part of this goes to the place I am currently living in and the country to which I am introducing a new philosophy. As Australia partly gives context to this research, before finishing this section on spirituality literature, I briefly overview Indigenous spirituality and explore the current situation of spirituality in Australia and Australian education.

Spirituality in the Context of Australia

Spirituality has always been an inseparable part of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's cultures and ways of living; it is earth-based, and is about people's wellbeing, ways of healing, connecting to all creatures, finding mystery in the ordinary, and the stories of places (D'Abbs, & Chenhall, 2013; Martin, 2005; Tacey, 2010).

The earth-based spirituality of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been under the influence of the imported heaven-based religions since some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in different places began to convert to religions like Christianity and Islam. However, Indigenous Christian and Muslim descendants are still so deeply connected to their traditional culture that they often return to their earlier spiritual awareness (Stephenson, 2013) and Indigenous spirituality continues to be an important part of their spiritual being. Thus, in "an Aboriginal post-colonial discourse of identity and cultural reclamation" (D'Abbs, & Chenhall, 2013, p. 1120), Indigenous spirituality can still be viewed as a special relationship that bounds Aboriginal people together, to the earth and to a higher being.

The government in Australia is now secular and there is no official national religion in the country. People in Australia are free to choose any religion they select. For years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia were prohibited from performing their traditional cultural and spiritual practices "unless required as entertainment for visitors to the reserve" (Martin, 2005, p. 33). But now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, according to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2008), can "maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas, and other resources" (Article 25), and "have the right to manifest, practice, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies" (Article 12). However, it seems that in Australia some religious beliefs are still more welcomed than others as, for example, Australia has public holidays on Christian days such as Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Christmas day.

Research shows that Indigenous spirituality, along with some other religious minorities, are still marginalized in Australia, and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are subjected to "misplaced religious critique and misrepresentation" (Sutherland, 2011, p. 95).

In education, a trace of spirituality has recently found its way to the Australian curriculum. By 2008, the closest thing to spiritual education in Australian curriculum was the idea of developing ethical understanding that, according to the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, could help students to develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others and become "confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, pp. 8-9).

A reference to spirituality appeared in an Australian learning framework for the first time in 2009 (Bone, 2010b). In *Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia*, the word spiritual is mentioned and defined as "a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, and an exploration of being and knowing" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 46). According to this document, early childhood education in Australia should consider a holistic approach towards learning that recognizes "the connectedness of mind, body and spirit" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14), and spiritual learning should be interwoven and interrelated to physical, social, emotional, personal, creative, cognitive and linguistic learnings. With reference to this document, adding spirituality to learning programs in early childhood classes seems feasible. But not many spiritual activities in Australian pre-schools have been illustrated in spirituality research; and in spite of changes in education policy, spirituality is "still a marginalised area" (Bone, 2014, p. 125) in Australian early childhood education.

Researchers who have studied the notion of spirituality and education in Australian primary schools also argue that there has been some resistance to the idea of adding spirituality to learning programs, especially across the public sector of education in Australia (de Souza & Hyde, 2007). de Souza and Hyde (2007) refer to two probable reasons for this resistance. The first reason is that for many people in Australia, including educational leaders, spirituality is a reminder of the negative aspects of religious education. The second reason is pluralism: the fact that Australia is a multicultural country and schools have students with a wide range of cultural backgrounds and multiple faiths. Spiritual education in such a context can lead to confusion and uncertainty when students and their families have dissimilar shades of interpretation of any given value.

The current situation of spirituality in Australian universities and research is not yet certain. In order to help spirituality find a respected place in research, spiritual researchers try explore religious themes in different aspects of life (Tacey, 2010), and show that spirituality can contribute to other fields of studies. Spiritual researchers make an effort to show that spirituality is "an innate human characteristic, as essential to the wholeness of being as intellectual, physical and emotional attributes" (de Souza & Watson, 2016, p. 346). They try to define spirituality as something that goes beyond the "organised religion or dogmatic theology in their old, premodern forms" (Tacey, 2003, p. 2); something that can offer human beings a new lens with which they will be able to behold the world differently and critique previously accepted beliefs (Bone, 2008). According to Rees (1993), who researched the notion of doubt in Australia, in spite of the refusal of many aspects of religion, there was still a degree of faith in Australia at that time. I think there is still a degree of faith in Australia today; and as the significance of spirituality is better recognised in the society, new researchers will join the field and share their stories with others.

In the next section, I overview three key concepts in spirituality that are used in the analysis of my experiences in the upcoming discussion chapters.

Key Subjects and Main Themes in the Analysis

This section of the literature review is divided into three parts. In the first part I review the literature on the concept of mysticism in different traditions, including Islamic mysticism and Sufism, because my working definition of spirituality is very much aligned with the approach of mysticism. In the second part, I discuss the notion of prayer and contemplation since the spiritual experiences I have selected to analyse in this thesis are chosen from my prayer practices. In the third part, I review the literature on the perceptions of faith and doubt as they are the main themes in my analysis.

Mysticism

Mysticism, when it is defined as that dim consciousness of the beyond, is not only a raw material of all religions and philosophies, but can be considered as the essence of all arts (Inge, 1913). Many philosophers, poets, musicians, painters, and sculptors referred to mysticism when they explained about their inspirations and revelations, even though they did not see themselves as religious. The sculpture, printmaker and designer Michael Kitching, who was one of the original voices of 1960s art in Australia, once said in an interview: "I gave up orthodox religion a long time ago, but I've never given up the belief that my art is a religious act. I think … [artists] are the best people to define God because they are always reaching 'beyond'" (Crumlin, 2011, p. 56).

Although mysticism is connected to many different philosophies, in most research it has been related to theology and religion. Writing a book on Christian mysticism about a century ago, Inge (1913) defined religious mysticism as "the attempt to realise, in thought and feeling, the immanence of the temporal in the eternal, and of the eternal in the temporal" (p. 5). Inge (1913) explained that mystics were those who searched for God in their soul, tried to achieve some esoteric knowledge of Divine, deliberately shut their eyes to all external things, and kept their mouth shut about their spiritual experiences.

After over one hundred years since Inge's (1913) book was published, many researchers still refer to same characteristics when they define mystics. Ringer (2003), in his research on faith and language, mentioned that mystics "held a strong belief in the limitations of language" (p. 4) and contended that what they perceived in spirituality was not communicable. Nash and Bradly (2007) also, in their essay on moral conversation, referred to mystics' quietude by saying that a genuine faith required "a discerning silence on the part of the believer, instead of a learned theological disquisition" (p. 141).

Mystics not only remained silent about the spiritual knowledge they gained but were also supposed to let go of their desires. They needed to "arise from temporal and corporeal things and aspire to the Divine, to the highest ones" (Vinzent, 2012, p. 176). In other words, the mystic's love toward the Source was a love without earthly desires (Moyaert, 2002), as the mystic's soul sought nothing but God's contentment and accepted everything as it was. One can find many passages about self-effacement and letting go of desires in Scriptures, but this virtue has its roots in Eastern philosophies, including Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, Korean philosophy, and Japanese philosophy that share many characteristics of mysticism.

The most ancient quote I could find on self-effacement belonged to Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher who lived in the 6th century before Christ and had great influence on Chinese thought through philosophical and religious Taoism. Lao Tzu (1963) emphasised on this virtue by saying

> There is no crime greater than having too many desires
> There is no disaster greater than not being content
> There is no misfortune greater than being covetous
> Hence in being content, one will always have enough. (p. 107)

This virtue has remained a part of mysticism in many faiths and philosophy ever since and has affected many of other aspects of mysticism including meditation, prayer, and communication with the Source.

Quietude and self-effacement are two significant features of mysticism; however, the core concept of mysticism in many religious traditions has been searching for God in the soul. The most important goal of most religious mystics was oneness with God. Meister Eckhart, a prominent German mystic and Christian philosopher in the 13th century, believed in a "transcendental potentiality within the soul through which the soul can enjoy a cognitive unity with God" (Davies, 1994, p. xxvi). Unity with God has also been an important stage for a Sufi in Islamic mysticism, where Sufism is defined as "a pious orientation toward religion, privileging the spiritual over the material, self-renunciation exercises and other forms of discipline as a means to approach God" (Franklin, 2008, p. 21). Although mystics of different traditions had their individual methods to reach this goal, most of them contended that the only way one could attain this unity is through one's own heart and one's own soul, as one's self is a miniature of the universe (B. Elahi, 1997).

In mysticism the path of divine knowledge passes through self-knowledge and the focus is "not *what* the person knows about God, but *how* the individual knows God" (Flanagan, 2016, p. 13). Mystics, who have gone beyond the exoteric level of religion, dedicate their lives to the quest of a mystical reunion with God whom they see as their Beloved (Rafi, 2016) and search for deeper layers of meaning for different religious aspects. However, seeking the same goal in their journey, mystics look at spirituality as a personally based belief system. As Nash and Bradley (2007) assert:

> Mystical students often declare their own unique spiritualities with as much conviction as Orthodox Believers do their religions. But, unlike Orthodox Believers, the Mystics are more likely to offer their testimonies from a strictly personal perspective, based on their own private faith understandings and practices. Their avenues for private spiritual connection with the world are far less doctrinally or institutionally driven. Mystics prefer to speak the language of practice and connection, the language of personal meditation, oneness, and mindfulness. (p. 142)

This feature of mysticism has been the most influential in my definition of spirituality, as the definition focuses on a personal journey toward the Beloved and knowing God through knowing self.

There is one more important feature to the notion of mysticism that I need to mention here, and this is the idea that mysticism is timeless and non-dogmatic. Mysticism goes beyond any particular faith or philosophy and reconciles various spiritual paths as mystics contend that all paths eventually converge at a single point (B. Elahi, 2005). No matter what faith they believe in, mystics deliberate over the meaning of life in their personal ways, and respect all other ways chosen by different spiritual travellers.

Meister Eckhart once boldly announced that "the pagan philosophies, Moses and Christ all professed the same truth, although each did so differently and at different levels of realization" (Davies, 1994, p. xxii). Those who have studied Meister Eckhart maintain that by having such ideas "he lifted Christianity above any parochial conception and revealed its inner relation to the great, universal spiritual movements which have found expression in many forms" (Blakney, 1941, p. xiv). Indeed, all mystics have done the same to their faith.

Prayer and Contemplation

Prayer is an important part of many religions and philosophies. St. Augustine named prayer, along with good works and sacraments, as one of the three essentials through which "the Christian draws nearer to union with his creator" (Topping, 2010, p. 65); and in Tibetan Buddhism the doctrinal study is "enhanced by prayer and the recitation of tantric sadhanas" (Batchelor, 1990, p. 7). In most of the great religious traditions including Christianity, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, prayer is used as a means for "the interconnection between the self and the source of all beings" (Maier-Lorentz, 2004, p. 25). While the objective of the prayer is virtually similar in various beliefs, it takes different forms in different traditions and philosophers have argued about the best ways of practicing it.

Prayer in western philosophy. One of the most common practices of praying through the history of religions has been petitionary prayer or the prayer of request that can be traced back to traditional pagan prayer. Petitionary prayer, in which one usually asks for material goods or an end to a suffering, has always been criticised for its immorality, ridiculousness, mediocrity, and egotism (Dorival, 2016).

Many philosophers, like Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Philo of Alexandria, Maximus of Tyre, Plotinus and Porphyry, considered petitionary prayer as "constraint of the gods" (Dillon & Timotin, 2016, p. 2) and tried to moralise and spiritualise the act of praying in their philosophies (Dorival, 2016). The reasons each philosopher chose to reject petitionary prayer gave ground for a particular definition for prayer and ideas on the proper way of praying – the philosopher's prayer as opposed to ordinary person's prayer.

Although philosophers have written different statements on the right way of praying, most of their ideas are somehow similar. The main argument of most Platonic, Middle Platonic, and Neoplatonic philosophers is that petitionary prayer belongs to ignorant ordinary people while the philosopher's prayer is free from request. The most famous philosophical comment on prayer belongs to Socrates (470-399 BC) who uttered a prayer to Pan and asked generally for whatever is good for him and being beautiful within (Dillon, 2016). Socrates' prayer that was cited in Plato's *Phaedrus* was referred to by philosophers afterwards while each of them tried to elaborate on it and add their own specific views. Philo (25 BC – 50 AD), for example, maintained that a decent prayer was in the form of "intellectual contemplation" (Luz, 2016, p. 53) which mainly consisted of thanking God and was accompanied with a virtuous and pious life. Maximus, who lived in late second century AD, regarded a virtuous prayer as a conversation with God in which one did not pray to receive anything but simply discussed with God what one had already received: a prayer "which calls forth gifts … even before the request is made" (O'Brian, 2016, p. 65). Plotinus (204 – 270 AD) wrote that with the help of a righteous prayer, in which pious people should turn their power of apprehension inwards, empty their head from all worldly sounds, and patiently wait to hear the voices from above, they could become aware of the truth that was "already present unnoticed" (Wakoff, 2016, p. 74).

The higher stages of Neoplatonic prayer went beyond language. Porphyry elaborated on his Master's (Plotinus) theory and discussed that the appropriate prayer was "a silent prayer" (Timotin, 2016, p. 100) that was addressed to God. In such a prayer, one should rid the mind of all external thoughts and completely focus on the light-source. This kind of prayer ultimately led to states of ecstasy where "the conscious personality is negated and subsumed into some kind of cosmic unity" (Dillon, 2016, p. 20). In later times and by the influence of "the Stoic doctrine of determinism" (Dillon & Timotin, 2016, p. 2), philosophers emphasised the rational prayer in which "rational understanding was considered the prerequisite for deep emotion and silent prayer" (Bärsch, 2014, p. 28). In such a prayer one prayed only for having strength to accept what was inevitable.

Prayer in Islamic Mysticism. Islamic mysticism focuses on prayer as a way of communication with God, and pays more attention to the essence of prayer rather than its form. Reaching a high stage in spirituality, many Muslim mystics (Sufis) challenged the fixed forms of praying and used innovative ways to communicate with God. Sufis, with emphasis on subjective experience, often preferred a personal orientation toward God that was "often at odds with the communal and legalistic definition of piety expounded by the legal scholars and other men of religious learning" (Lewis, 2008, p. 21). Thus, they sometimes became subject to persecution or threats of persecution (Masroori, 2010). Nevertheless, they expanded the forms of prayer with different ways of conversation, poetry, silent prayer and meditation, and in some cases, prayer with music and dancing. They also considered some pragmatic ways such as being hopeful, being thankful towards God, and being helpful to others as a form of prayer.

In order to review the concept of prayer in Islamic mysticism deeper, I discuss the philosophy of one of its most well-known representatives, Muhammad Jalâl al-Din Balkhi, widely known as Rumi in the West. Rumi's philosophy was adapted by many later theologians not only in Islamic mysticism, but in many other religions and traditions and his poetry, which mostly appeared in the shape of stories, provided spiritual lessons for the seekers of truth and helped them in their quest of reuniting with the Creator. Along with previous Islamic mystics, Rumi believed in the unity of religious truth and argued that the essence of all religions was the same. As specified by Rumi, the main cause of conflict between religions was "the institute of religion" (Masroori, 2010, p. 249) that deformed the understanding of God. Perhaps Rumi's emphasis on unity is the reason his thoughts and teachings have been accepted so widely in the world of spirituality.

Prayer to Rumi was to open a window to see divine presence and be able to hear His messages. Having laid the groundwork for self-transformation, the truth seeker must pray with the hope "that a new vista, a window onto the transcendent, might open to our soul" (Lewis, 2008, p. 419). Describing one of his own prayer experiences, Rumi explained how honest prayer brought the seeker a sort of pureness and concluded that,

> Through pureness a window opens in my soul
> God's message comes immediate to me
> … Hell's the room in which there is no window
> To open windows, that's religion's goal. (Lewis, 2008, p. 419)

Although Rumi tried to share his spiritual experiences by writing poetry, he experienced things that were beyond explanation, and some of his most emotional prayers and what his soul saw through the open window was kept as a secret between him and his Beloved:

Silence!
I am so frenetic,
I rushed from fray
    toward refuge by the battle standard
put down the paper,
    snap the pen,
the Sâqi enters: Cheers! (Lewis, 2008, p. 337)

In this poem, Sâqi, or the cup-bearer, represents "the source of mystical inebriation" (Lewis, 2008, p. 338). As drinking wine in Islamic tradition is prohibited, Rumi used only a metaphor to show the degree of his soul's exhilaration when he experienced a confrontation with the Truth. By using the metaphor and instantaneously becoming silent, Rumi not only rejected the rationalist modes of religious discourse, but also presented a paradoxical way of sharing experiences – speaking of unspeakable – that is open to various interpretations.

Perhaps the most moving and most cited narrative among Rumi's prayer stories is the story of Moses and the shepherd (Moses rebukes the shepherd, God rebukes Moses). In this story, once Moses saw a simple shepherd who was praying and conversing with God in vulgar language, expressing his love toward Him. The shepherd was telling God that he would sew His moccasins, comb His hair, wash His clothes, kill His lice, kiss His little hands and rub His feet, and at bed times he would sweep His place to sleep. Hearing this, Moses got angry and rushed to the shepherd rebuking him: "Who's that you're talking with? / with the One who fashioned us / made the earth and heavens come to be/ Wretched is your state / you fill the world with stench of blaspheme / God's grandeur needs no ease and comfort" (Lewis, 2008, p. 371-372). The shepherd listened to Moses, became deeply sad, and left Moses feeling he had done something wrong.

Right after the shepherd left, a revelation came from God to Moses: "You've torn my servant from my presence / Were you sent in order to unite / or to distinguish and divide? / … We've no regard for words or language / We look for spirit and behaviour / We see the heart and if that's humble / ignore the words used, brash or mumbled" (Lewis, 2008, p. 373). The story continues with God further reproaching Moses. Moses, then, chased after the shepherd into the desert. He told the shepherd that God granted him permission to praise him in whatever way his heart desired, as the rites and modes of praise were not important. It became evident, however, that the shepherd's suffering on account of the rebuke of Moses elevated him to the next phase of spiritual development.

In many mystic traditions, prayer is defined as an ongoing sympathetic dialogue between the human lover and the divine Beloved which is manifested through the mutual creative imagination (Wexler, 2011). Rumi's story of Moses and the shepherd manifests an example of such communication. This story was cited by many mystics later to support personal approaches to praying. Different mystic traditions have used the story to encourage and innovate new ways of communicating with God and to respect and learn from other ways of praying in other branches of religious mysticism.

This story together with Rumi's explanation of prayer, where prayer is seen as an open window through which one can hear divine messages, helped me to find a personal definition for prayer. I used my own words most of the times I communicated with God and imagined that window in my prayers. Even though I did not receive tangible answers in many of my prayers, there were times when my soul experienced some deep spiritual connections. The stories I selected to analyse in the discussion chapters are both from those prayers that I felt a connection with the Source and heard God's messages, and those that I could not clearly hear Him.

One last important thing about prayer is that no matter how a prayer is performed, faith is always one of its significant aspects. Every experience of prayer can be analysed by looking at its reciprocal relationship with faith, both when faith has been present and when it has been absent – when one doubts.

Faith … and Doubt

Literature on faith shows that there have been different approaches to and various definitions for the concept. According to Kvanvig (2016), faith can be seen as a kind of knowledge or a feeling, as a type of belief or a special kind of trust, in terms of hope or a preference of a certain sort. The notion of faith has been challenged in secular societies for decades. There are controversial arguments around faith and reason. At the beginning of the 21st Century, Sam Harris (2004), an American philosopher and neuroscientist, published *The end of faith*, and Richard Dawkins (2006), an evolutionary biologist, published *The God delusion* in favour of "debunking of religious mysticism as well as a much-needed corrective to dogmatism" (Lane, 2011, p. 11), and in their books called faith a delusion and imposter.

At the same time, devout critics in Britain and America published books to defend their faith and accused the above writers of "a different kind of dogmatism, along with arrogance, theological ignorance, and uncompromising rationalism that left no room for doubt, flexibility, or error" (Lane, 2011, pp. 11-12). In their *The Godless Delusion*, for example, Madrid and Hensley (2010) named atheism a Big Lie that is constantly repeated everywhere, and claimed that they could use reason as the most effective language to debunk the atheists' argument. They also explained that their faith was not a mere theoretical concept, but they had solid, compelling reasons for believing in God.

A fact that fuels atheists' arguments is that in some religions and spiritualities, reason stands subordinate to faith. Unlike a Socratic inquiry where one needs to subject propositions to ruthless analysis in order to discover whether they are true or false, some religions analyse a doctrine in a way "to prove that it is true" (Batchelor, 1990, p. 13). While doubt is not encouraged in such religions or spiritualities, there are spiritual paths in which faith and doubt are brought together. To many spiritual researchers, a systematic, scientific or Socratic doubt stands essential to a mature or intelligent faith (Rees, 1993). The 17th Century Japanese Zen master Takasui believed that one must doubt deeply again and again "without aiming at anything or expecting anything in advance" (Batchelor, 1990, p. 15) in order to move toward awakening. Doubt is necessary because clear understanding often comes only after one doubts. As Ishmael, the narrator in Herman Melville's (1962) *Moby Dick*, asserts: "rainbows do not visit the clear air; … and so, through all the thick mist of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray" (p. 399-400).

Life, with all its unexpected challenges, is the best laboratory in which one's faith can be tested. As Os Guinness (1976), the English author and social critic, once proposed in his book written on doubt:

> Every moment and each new experience challenge faith for an interpretation. Can faith order the new experience, cope with it, handle it, assimilate it? Or will the new experience undermine faith, proving too much for it to understand and assimilate? If faith is to continue supplying a person's world view, it must answer this challenge constantly and completely. Equally its answer must be practical, not theoretical, and it must be fresh and contemporary, not yesterday's answer to today's challenge. (p. 110)

Thus, faith is not an unquestioning belief in something. As I explained earlier about critical thinking (see page 54), people need to keep questioning what beliefs mean to them, and the rise of religious extremism in many parts of the world makes such questioning more urgent than ever (Lane, 2011). Those spiritual researchers who view faith and doubt as inseparable entities assert that faith does not get weakened by the presence of doubt. In fact, a faith shows itself to be faith if it can affirm itself "by maintaining its commitment in spite of doubt" (Rees, 1993, p. 286). It is included in the structure of faith to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our life and to question whatever arises within us (Batchelor, 1990). John Patrick Shanley (2005), an American playwright whose play *Doubt* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, also looks at doubt not as a weakness, but as a means to grow and change things for the better:

> When a man feels unsteady, when he falters, when hard-won knowledge evaporates before his eyes, he's on the verge of growth. The subtle or violent reconciliation of the outer person and the inner core often seems at first like a mistake, like you've gone the wrong way and you're lost. But this is just emotion longing for the familiar. Life happens when the tectonic power of your speechless soul breaks through the dead habits of the mind. Doubt is nothing less than an opportunity to reenter the Present. (p. viii).

Therefore, Doubt does not prevent positive movements. A healthy faith always "includes an element of unknowing" (Rees, 1993, p. 284), and spiritual students often experience doubt as the core of their spiritual awareness (Batchelor, 1990). In fact, doubt helps them to continuously examine their beliefs closely and thoroughly, and keep an open mind to other interpretations and understandings.

There are times when doubt is seen as something temporary that should be overcome. Paul Tillich, a Christian existentialist philosopher, believed that to overcome doubt the spiritual traveller should not repress it but confront it with courage, because "God's acceptance extends to those who wrestle with doubt" (Rees, 1993, p. 287). This wrestling with doubt and the process of working through doubt remain among the best ways "to go on thinking, reflecting on choices, and wondering at uncertain outcomes" (Lane, 2011, p. 186). People should be given "the benefit of the doubt" (Lane, 2011, p. 7) in order not to accept too easy explanations. As Costello (2016) says in prayer:

> May God bless us with discomfort …
> Discomfort at easy answers,
> and half truths. (p. 262)

Doubt, thus, can be considered as unknowing dimension on faith. The existential doubt, according to Tillich, "involves an awareness of the insecurity of all our concrete knowledge" (Rees, 1993, p. 285). So for Tillich, it is not just that there may be doubt in faith, there may also be faith in doubt (Rees, 1993).

Faith and doubt are the main themes in the analysis of my prayer experiences. The analysis in the discussion chapters shows how my personal definition of faith has changed through time. However, there is a general definition I have had in my mind through all my experiences. Faith goes beyond belief when it is seen as "the condition of ultimate confidence that we have the capacity to follow the path of doubt to its end" (Batchelor, 1990, p. 17). This is the definition of faith I adopted in this thesis. For me there has always been some doubt in the existence of faith, and some faith in the presence of doubt.

Spirituality and Narrative

In this part I review the literature on spiritual narratives. Spiritual research is presented in many different forms, however, as the legitimacy of both spirituality and narrative is increasing in universities (Erricker & Erricker, 2016), doing research on spirituality with narrative methods is becoming more accepted.

Many researchers choose a narrative method for their spiritual research because spiritual experiences are more easily communicated if they are presented in the form of a story. Another reason for choosing a narrative methodology is that narrating a spiritual experience by itself can help researchers with their own spiritual growth, because when an experience is revisited in the story, the researcher can look at it with a different perspective. Many researchers indicate that narratives not only might change the readers' attitudes, but also make personal growth possible for the researcher (Adler & McAdams, 2007; Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Cohler, 2008). Writing life stories may lead to a better self-knowledge, as "it might hold a series of crucial clues as to how we act and live" (Goodson, 2013, p. 63). Winslade and Monk (2008), who research on narrative mediation, also observe that people can see the hidden facts in their life stories and accept different perspectives, as they see how every story can bring about an "opening to an alternative story" (p. 3).

Since many spiritual researchers are also practitioners of spirituality, choosing a narrative methodology enables them to share their findings with others while working on their self- knowledge and self-transformation. As Neiman (2000) states, one of the best ways to learn about future steps in a spiritual journey is "through initiation and acquaintance with the quests of others" (p. 572).

Spirituality and Culture - Spiritual Autoethnographies

Among spiritual researchers who are interested in narrative methodologies, those who focus on "the power of storytelling as a way to describe and critique culture" (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 109) typically take autoethnography as the method for their research. These researchers mix artistic representation, scientific inquiry, self-narration and ethnography in their research to analyse their experiences (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). By turning their spiritual experiences into stories in their autoethnographies, these researchers also "disrupt the traditional forms of representation" (Chase, 2011, p. 423) by provoking emotions in readers rather than simply describing their experiences.

Autoethnography has been recognised as a reliable approach only recently. In her meta-autoethnographic book, Carolyn Ellis (2009), who is internationally known as the originator and developer of autoethnography, explained how her autoethnographic paper on jealousy was rejected by reviewers because it did not include quantitative data. She asserted that the paper was published only after she inserted a few statistics to it. However, autoethnographers "have moved from defending autoethnography as research to witnessing its explosion in many disciplines and applied research all over the world" (Ellis, 2015, p. 10); and one of these disciplines is spirituality. Autoethnography, where "the culture of one's group is contextualised" (Madison, 2012, p. 197), helps spiritual researchers to see how the nature of their experiences deals both with their selves and the experiences' contexts.

There are many researchers who have researched with autoethnographic methods. These researchers have written in different disciplines, like gender issues, race, education, music, and wellbeing, and focused on different subject matters. In the next section, I review the work and ideas of those who have been the most influential in my research.

My Key Figures in Autoethnography

I began to investigate autoethnography only four years ago. I read theoretical books to learn about the methodology, and I read autoethnographic journal articles and dissertations to better understand how to conduct such research. In the process of learning and doing autoethnography, a group of researchers proved themselves most inspiring to me. I learned a great deal about theory and analysis from Chang's (2008) *Autoethnography as method* and Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis's (2015) *Autoethnography*. I was influenced by Spry's (2011a) performative autoethnography and Denzin's (2014) interpretive autoethnography, and inspired by all the autoethnographic articles collected in Bochner and Ellis' (2002) *Ethnographically speaking*, Boylorn and Orbe's (2014) *Critical autoethnography*, and Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis's (2015a) *Handbook of autoethnography*.

However, the book that interested me the most was Chang and Boyd's (2011) *Spirituality in higher education: Autoethnographies*. To my knowledge, this is the only book in which all the collected articles discuss spirituality with an autoethnographic approach. Although the book explores spirituality in the discipline of higher education, it greatly helped me in analysis of my spiritual experiences. Chang's (2011) article, Autoethnography as method for spirituality research in the academy, considerably encouraged me to be true to myself in my writing, write details of my experiences and analyse my thoughts and feelings courageously. Chang (2011) explained, at the beginning of her article, how she decided to give a voice to her personal faith and dedicate her doctoral thesis to God although her dissertation advisor cautiously had advised her not to do so. Chang and Boyd's (2011) book is one of the most notable research among spiritual autoethnographies, but the autoethnographer with whom I identified the most in my thesis was Carolyn Ellis.

Ellis's autoethnographical work astonished me from the very beginning. I chose autoethnography as my method when I read her *Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004) and decided on steps of analysis after reading *Revision* (Ellis, 2009). She does autoethnography by writing about her challenging experiences (Ellis, 2004), and does "meta-autoethnography" (Ellis, 2009, p. 12) by explaining how she constructs meaning by doing autoethnography. Although she has never published a spiritual autoethnography, her writing to me is all spiritual, especially when she writes about her dramatic tensions and ethical dilemmas – for example, where she explained her mother had not read her essay on maternal connections (Ellis, 2004). In the analysis of her experiences, she examines her physical feelings and emotions, and explores her thoughts and intentions, and this is exactly what I do in my thesis.

This research uses an autoethnographic approach in a framework which is new to the context of Australia. I have migrated to and lived in five different countries in the past twenty years and like everyone in a diaspora population, I have taken my spirituality with me everywhere I have gone. My autoethnography analyses the spiritual experiences in these countries and highlights their cultural aspects through the lens of teachings and thoughts of Ostad Elahi. In the next chapter, the methodology chapter, I discuss autoethnography as my research methodology, explain about the process of data collection and clarify the steps of data analysis.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

This chapter discusses the research methodology and specific methods used to conduct this study. I explain how the necessary data have been collected, selected, presented and analysed to address the research objectives and research questions. Thus, in this chapter, I give an explanation of the research design, and clarify data generation methods, techniques of data collection, and steps of data analysis.

The methodology in this research is "autoethnography as qualitative method" (Chang, 2011, p. 13). After examining definitions of autoethnography, I explain why it is a suitable approach for this research, and bring a personal definition that suits the aim and objectives of the research. At the end of the chapter, after explaining about the stages of data analysis, I write about evaluating autoethnography and discuss ethical issues that may arise in an autoethnography.

A Qualitative Approach

This research is a qualitative study that explores Natural Spirituality as an educational process. The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of practicing ethical principles in Natural Spirituality on my behaviour and my attitude towards life by autoethnographically analysing some of my experiences in the past twenty years. As a qualitative researcher, I study my "real-world settings inductively to generate rich narrative descriptions" (Patton, 2005, p. 1) and to understand how I interpret my experiences, what meaning I attribute to them and how I have constructed my world through them (Merriam, 2009). I show "where, when, how, and under what circumstances" (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992, p. 1) my reflections have come into being and what circumstances are they a part of.

I belong to the group of researchers who view writing as "method of discovery" (Richardson, 2010, p. 35). Writing, to me, is "a way of coming to know an experience better or differently" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 68) and finding more about the self and the world. I believe that through writing I come to know my personality traits and motivational concerns more deeply, and through my self-narratives I can continuously reconstitute my world and my identity (Chowdhury, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008).

I chose autoethnography as my method of research because writing is the main part of the autoethnographic process "from the beginning of a project through its completion" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 68). As a qualitative research method, autoethnography enables me to use my autobiographical and contextual data "to gain a hermeneutic understanding of the social context and, in turn, a sociocultural meaning of self" (Chang, 2011, p. 13). Autoethnography, thus, moves beyond a "means of self-understanding" (Colyar, 2015, p. 366) and can be used for social connections. As a kind of self-narrative, it often invites its audience to participate in its ongoing enactment and becomes "empathically connected to the articulated lived experience" (Alexander, 2000, p. 97). In doing so, autoethnography makes qualitative research not only an inquiry project, but a moral, allegorical, and therapeutic one, and an autoethnographic story turns to "a prop [or] a pillar … that will help men and women endure and prevail in the opening years of the 21st century" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a, p. xiii).

But, what exactly is autoethnography and how is it conducted? Is it an objective or a subjective research methodology? In the next section of the chapter, I answer these questions by exploring different definitions of autoethnography, explain the reasons I chose it for my research, and introduce my personal definition of the term.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is mostly defined as a form of "self-focused inquiry" (Chang, 2011, p. 15) that places the self in different "social contexts" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 6; Spry, 2001, p. 710). It is a kind of "autobiographical personal narrative that explores the author's experience of life" (Mallet, 2011, p. 28), and can "turn a personal experience into a cultural interpretation" (Eisikobits & Koren, 2014, p. 318). As "the term autoethnography invokes the *self* (auto), *culture* (ethno), and *writing* (graphy)" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 46), autoethnographers write about their own experiences to "gain a hermeneutic understanding of the social context and, in turn, a sociocultural meaning of self" (Chang, 2011, p. 13), and engage more deeply with other people, different cultures, politics, and social research (Adams, et al., 2015).

Autoethnographers research themselves, as they are both researchers and participants in their projects. However, autoethnography is also an excellent vehicle to know others, because "understanding others may easily begin with knowing and affirming self" (Chang, 2008, p. 28). Thus, autoethnography can be more than the record of personal experiences and can even go beyond illustrating cultural differences. By exploring their own life, autoethnographers come to "understand a way of life" (Ellis, 2004, p. xvii; Reed-Danahay 1997) that can be communicated to many others. Describing herself as an autoethnographer, Ellis (2009) writes:

> I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed, the creator and created. I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller. (p. 13)

Autoethnography is considered as a subjective methodology. Once, qualitative researchers assumed that qualified observers could report on their own observations of the social world "with objectivity, clarity, and precision" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a, p. 11). In the 1970s, sociology was committed to "scientific method and objectivity" (Ellis, 2004, p. 15). Sociologists paid little or no attention to researchers' own experiences and their emotions, and advised researchers to keep their subjectivity and values to themselves. The notion of objectivity, however, came under assault by poststructuralist and postmodernist researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a) as they doubted the possibility of being truly objective in research. Many methodologies used in human sciences research in the 21st century, are proud to be subjective. Among those, are autoethnographers who contend that not only subjectivity in research is legitimate, but also "there's something to be gained by saturating your observations with your own subjectivity" (Ellis, 2004, p. 89). As a subjective methodology, to do autoethnography one should "study and write culture from the perspective of the self" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 46) and present it "as a story" (Ellis, 2004, p. xvii). Autoethnographers use "systematic sociological introspection and emotion recall" (Ellis, 2004, p. xvii) and pay attention to their feelings, thoughts, and emotions, while writing about an experience they have lived through. Then, they connect "the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) by transforming their stories into sound scholarly narratives that are sensitive to cultural diversity.

Autoethnography can also stand among narrative methodologies, as it shares many of the characteristics. Like all narrative methodologies, autoethnography goes beyond "the uncritical gathering of stories" (Trahar, 2009, part 1) and autoethnographers, like all narrative researchers, "are compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10).

Like most stories that are analysed with narrative methodologies, the stories in an autoethnography value "intimate, mundane, and marginalized social realities" (Peterson & Langellier, 1997, p. 135) that are important to know and cannot be revealed unless someone writes about them. It was mostly this aspect of autoethnography that attracted me to the methodology and I found it the most suitable approach for my research.

Why Autoethnography?

I have been a story person all my life. As a child, I spent hours reading story books. While many English children's stories begin with *Once upon a time*, Persian stories usually begin with a paradoxical phrase *yeki bood*, *yeki nabood* which literally means "there was one, and there wasn't one" (Milani, 2002, p. 620). The phrase caught my attention every time I read a story and I lingered over it pondering what it could mean. Perhaps it was this phrase that helped me develop a mind interested in paradoxes. I constantly questioned ideas and searched for alternative meanings, especially when I was older and began reading Persian mystic poetry in which poets used narrations with different potential meanings, to discuss their spiritual ideas indirectly.

I often had a narrative method for learning and memorizing things and changed the study materials at school into narratives to make them more understandable. Stories became a useful means for communicating with people and I found creative ways that could enhance the possibility of meaning making and compensate for the deficiencies of language that sometimes led to misunderstandings. Therefore, I became a person who knew the world and came to give meaning to life through story (Trahar, 2009), and reading stories, telling stories, and thinking in the form of stories became a habit of mine that I never let go.

I used my story-telling habit in writing my diaries, too. The stories in my diaries are about happenings that I have regarded as special and worth remembering. By writing about my daily experiences in the form of stories and highlighting their special impact on me, I hoped to turn them from parts of my mundane life "into something transcendent" (de Caro, 2013, p. x). I also internalised my experiences by writing them and made them a part of my personal memory that helped me know myself better. When I engaged in spirituality, I wrote my experiences in my spiritual diaries to have a record of my efforts and improvements, and to be able to know more about my intentions and motivations.

I chose autoethnography to analyse my spiritual experiences because it seemed a method of self-discovery to me. I thought I could use it as a complementary practice to my already existing spiritual self-knowledge practices. Autoethnography helped me to pay attention to the cultural aspects of my spiritual experiences. It is important to know that although every story can be seen as a cultural creation by itself and "a cultural world is constituted within a framework of stories" (Winslade & Monk, 2001, p. 53), telling stories does not "automatically" result in a cultural understanding (Chang, 2008, p. 13). By doing autoethnography, I could find different interpretations for my "cultural assumptions" (Chang, 2008, p. 9), and transform my autobiographical data into a scholarly text.

Another reason I chose autoethnography was that it is a friendly communicative method. According to Chang (2008), autoethnography is a method that is both "researcher-friendly" and "reader-friendly" (p. 52). It is researcher-friendly because it gives researchers "easy access to the primary data source from the beginning" as "the source is the researchers themselves" (Chang, 2008, p. 52). It is reader-friendly since "the personally engaging writing style tends to appeal to readers more than conventional scholarly writing" (Chang, 2008, p. 52), and it can touch readers' lives and provide a voice to which readers respond.

Doing autoethnography, therefore, not only took me through a new journey of self-knowledge but enabled me to bring readers into my stories by inviting them to feel how I felt in each experience. I could provide the opportunity for readers "to live my experiences alongside with me" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 106) and go through a rediscovery of their own selves by experiencing an alternative life.

Personal Definition

Autoethnography's wide domain of practice leads to both the undesirability and impossibility of arriving at a single definition (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Researchers choose to have personal definitions for autoethnography that suit the nature of their research and help them find their own autoethnographer selves. For example, Spry's (2011a) performative-I, which is conceptualised in the disciplinary convergence of performance studies and ethnography and is based in critical reflections upon self in culture, "constitutes a significant divergence from the concentration of evocative emotion in the ethnographic-I of Ellis's work" (p. 35).

To find a working definition for my autoethnography, I studied different definitions presented by other autoethnographers, and made a collage by picking the parts related to and befitting my research, as follows:

> Autoethnography, to me, is a self-reflection method that helps me explore my "experience of life" (Mallet, 2011, p. 28) through a process which keeps me moving "forward, backward, in circle, or all at once" (Spry, 2011b, p. 502) in between my memories. It is also a collection of my personal narratives that places my spiritual self in different social and cultural contexts (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001) and helps me search for meanings of self in each context.

By doing autoethnography, first the researcher-I examines, studies, questions and critiques my spiritual self as an "other" (Alexander, 2005, p. 423). Then, the autoethnographic-I (Ellis, 2004) inscribes my feelings, intentions and motivations, and thus has the potential to evoke the same emotions in readers. I also use autoethnography "as an educational process to improve my own knowledge and understanding" (Nethsinghe, 2012, p. 2). I approach autoethnography "not as a project to be completed, but as a continuous learning experience" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 9) to get better knowledge of my psychospiritual self and find out how my spiritual understandings have shaped my current self as a researcher. In other words, I write about my motives, feelings, thoughts, achievements and failures with others to discover the hidden features of my experiences.

Data Generation Methods

My data generation methods are the techniques I used to practice ethical principles. In Natural Spirituality, theory without practice is considered ineffective, and progress is achieved only through regular training and exercise. As explained in Chapter 2, "the soul's process of assimilating ethical principles" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 52) takes place in four phases of attention, reflection, memorization, and assimilation. The process starts with learning and thinking about theories that provide an in vitro knowledge (B. Elahi, 2012). However, it is completed only if that knowledge becomes in vivo (B. Elahi, 2012) and each ethical principle is practiced in relation to other people repeatedly until it transforms to a divine virtue. Students in Natural Spirituality are obliged to practice ethics with efficient methods and for every exercise provide suitable means for self-assessment (Calvez, 2012). This process connects to my approach of generating data.

Natural Spirituality has different techniques with which I have practiced in vivo spiritual exercises in relation to my family, friends, co-workers, neighbours, and other people in the society for the past twenty years. There have been booklets, board games, practice cards, questions to be regularly answered, and recently Internet based labs and modules. Using these techniques, I needed to focus, for a certain period of time, on specific ethical practices: avoiding backbiting; trying not to criticise or complain; supporting and helping others; replacing negative thoughts with practical positive ones; being responsible, organized and punctual; being grateful; taking steps towards having a healthier life and protecting the environment; and meditation, attention and contemplation.

In this thesis I consider these techniques as techniques of data collection. I have recorded details of my practices and experiences in the form of open-ended self-reflective stories in my diaries ever since I started practicing Natural Spirituality. My written personal experiences, that I consider as my data, illustrate the flow of thoughts I have had in different situations (Spry, 2011a) and are essential means for my later "introspection, self-analysis, and self-evaluation" (Chang, 2008, p. 95). In the next section, I bring more details and explanations about the techniques with pictures and examples.

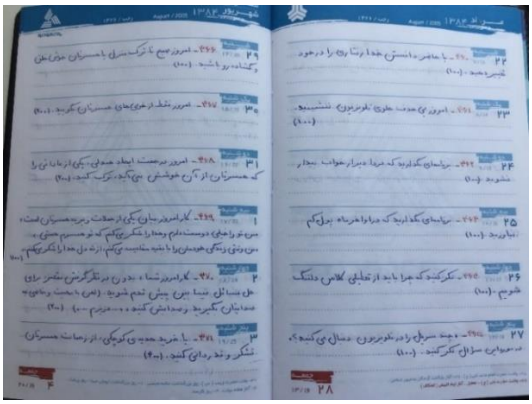
Techniques of Data Collection

To put the ethical principles into practice, I used different techniques. Although these techniques had different forms, they all aimed at a similar goal. The aim was to get a better knowledge of self and to change behaviour toward a balanced life which could help in attaining a respectful material life and spiritual growth. Below, I explain some of the exercises, as some examples, that are related to my practices of prayer and attention:

The album. There were nine packs of small papers (like packs of post-its). On one side of the small papers, the title of the practice was written (as below):

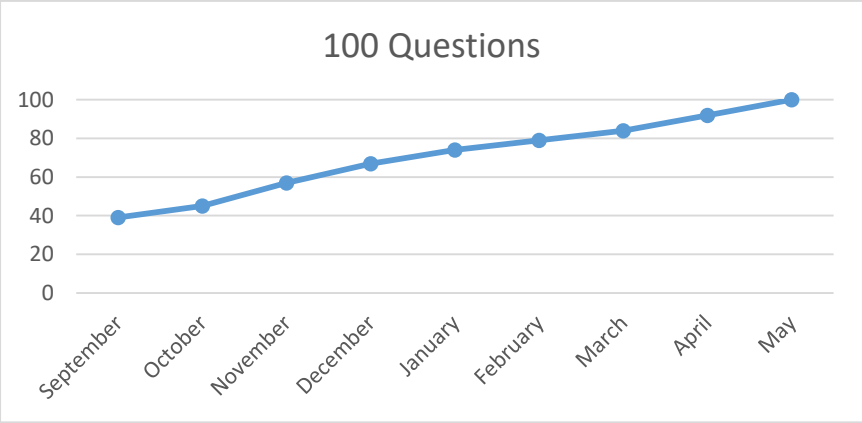
Renouncing the Desires of the Ego	Observing Rights/ Responsibility	Humility/Modesty
Kindness/Love/ Benevolence	Education of Thought	Attention/Meditation/ Prayer
Balance	Thankfulness	Perseverance and Willpower

I picked a paper every day and followed the instructions on the back of the paper. I practiced this exercise in 1994, and for attention/meditation/prayer, for example, I needed to feel the divine presence a certain number of times in a day and change my behaviour, words, or thoughts to His satisfaction, or have a loving conversation with God during the day. As I had a choice to select from different topics, my practices of prayer and attention in that period occurred at irregular intervals. Later I made two notebooks in which I wrote all the practices and practiced each exercise when I felt I needed it.



Practice booklets. There were some practice booklets that focused on particular ethical topics. Following the instructions in the booklets, students needed to concentrated on one aspect of the topic each day and try to finish the program in a certain period of time. The topics, for example, were about positive-thinking or decent behaviour in the society.

100 questions. There was a list containing 100 questions that needed to be answered at the end of each month. The questions were arranged in a way that I got one point if I answered "Yes" to a question. I was also supposed to draw a diagram showing my points for each month to be able to evaluate my efforts and progress, as below:



The questions covered a range of ethical practices and were related to different aspects of life, and I had to manage my life in a way to be able to answer Yes to as many questions as I could. Those that were related to prayer practices asked me to begin each day thinking of God, recite Ostad Elahi's prayer (B. Elahi, 1987, p. 703) at least once a day, and have certain times for my daily prayers. During the time I practiced "100 questions" prayer practices were among my daily spiritual practices and I had intimate conversations with God regularly three times a day.

Colour-cards. The white cards came with a list of practices. I was supposed to choose two items in the list – the ones that I thought as the most essential toward my spiritual growth, considering my weak points and flaws – and write the number of the items on the cards, as below:

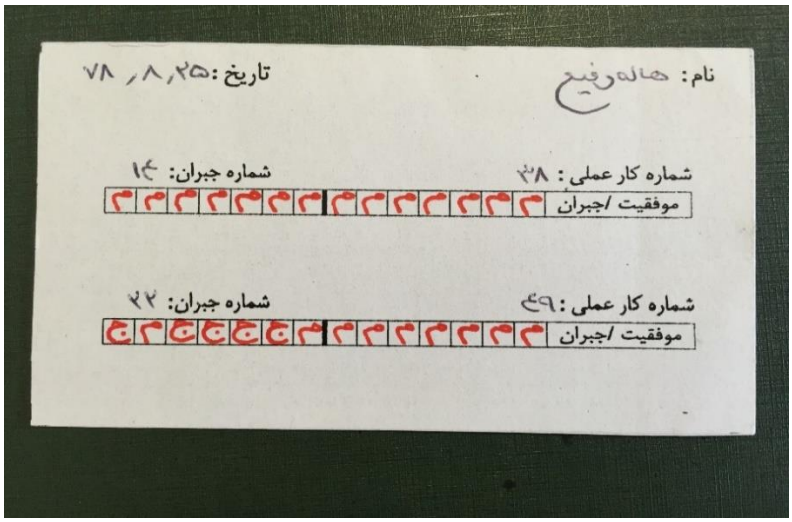
Name: Haleh Date: 26/10/1998

Item: 38 Compensation Item: 14

S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S

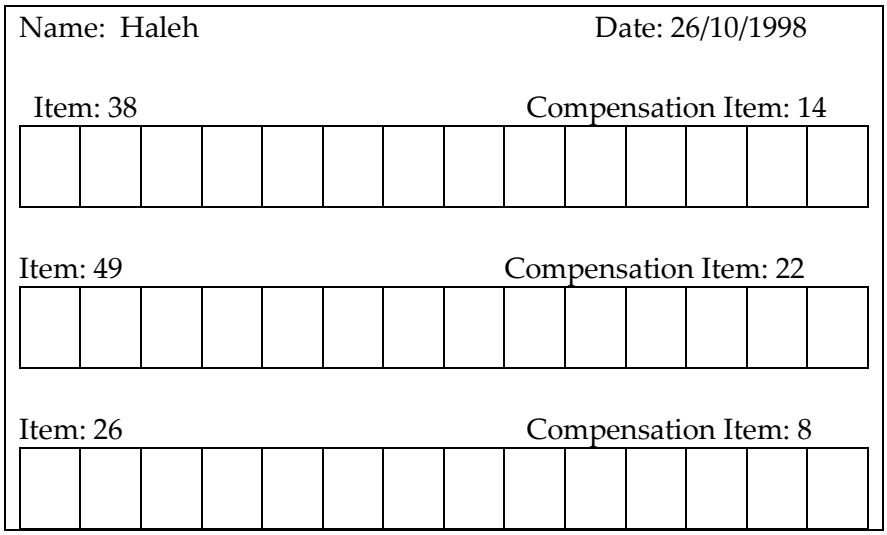
Item: 49 Compensation Item: 22

S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	C	C	C	C	S	C



There were also some practices that I chose as compensation items. I had to try my best to do the items I had chosen every day. If I was successful I wrote "S" (for success) in the box, if not I had the chance to do the compensation item the day after, and I then wrote "C" (for compensation). If I was successful in doing neither, then the box remained blank.

I had four white cards and worked on each card for two weeks. I could only be upgraded to the next section of the exercise if I could complete four white cards with no more than sixteen blank boxes on all four of them. If I passed the first phase successfully, after eight weeks I could move to the next level, in which I had to work on three items at the same time. The cards in the second level were blue and looked like below picture:



Again, after eight weeks and completing four blue cards, I could move to the next level, provided that the blank boxes in all blue cards were not more than 24. In the third phase, I had pink cards and four items. With less than 32 blank boxes, I could move to the highest level where I needed to complete green cards with five items on them. The exercise came to an end if I could complete four the green cards with less than forty blank boxes in them. The whole program was designed for 32 weeks, or one academic year.

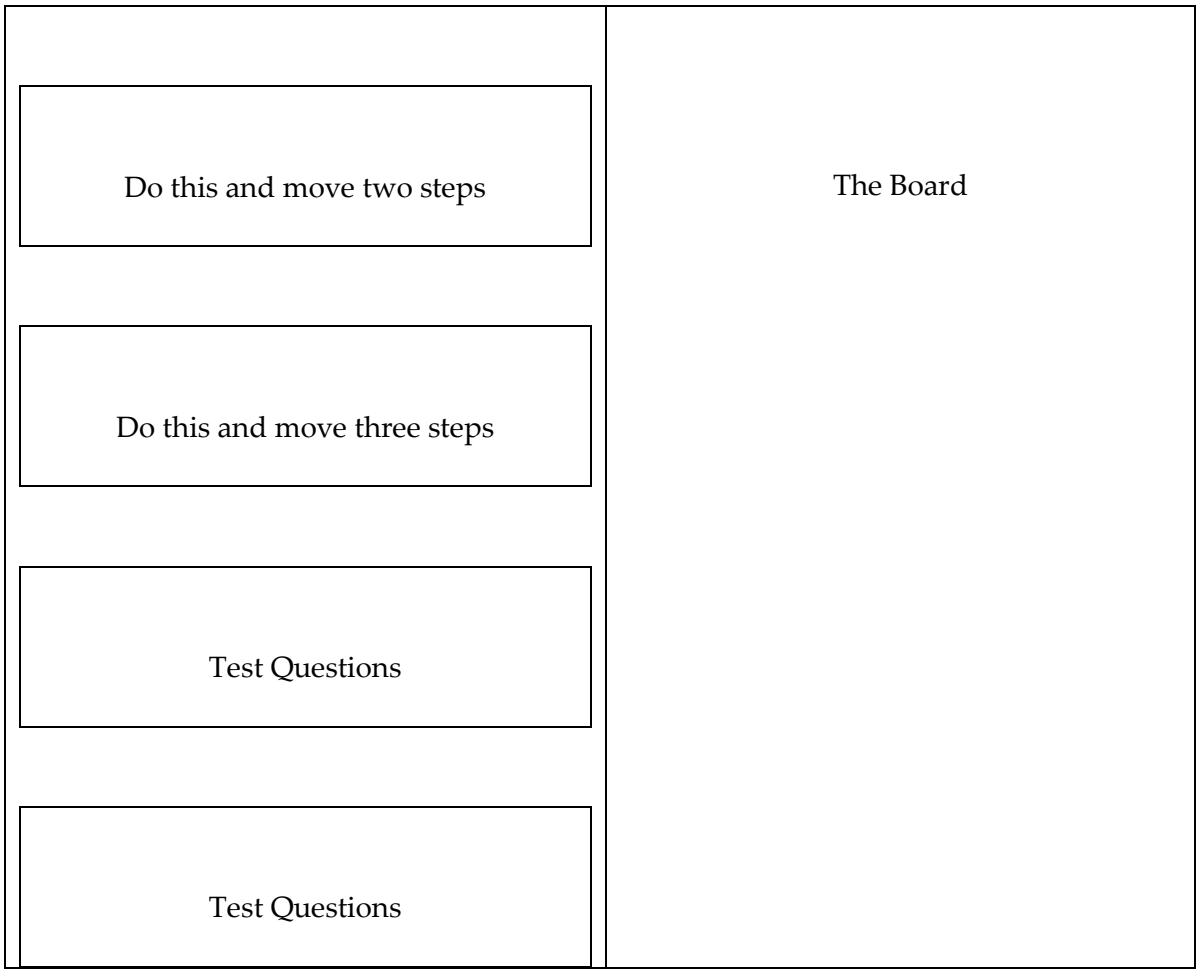
If I was not successful in each level and the number of blank boxes were more than the above mentioned numbers, I then would receive a yellow card and be introduced to a new program that could increase my motivation to be more organised and continue carrying out the ethical practices.

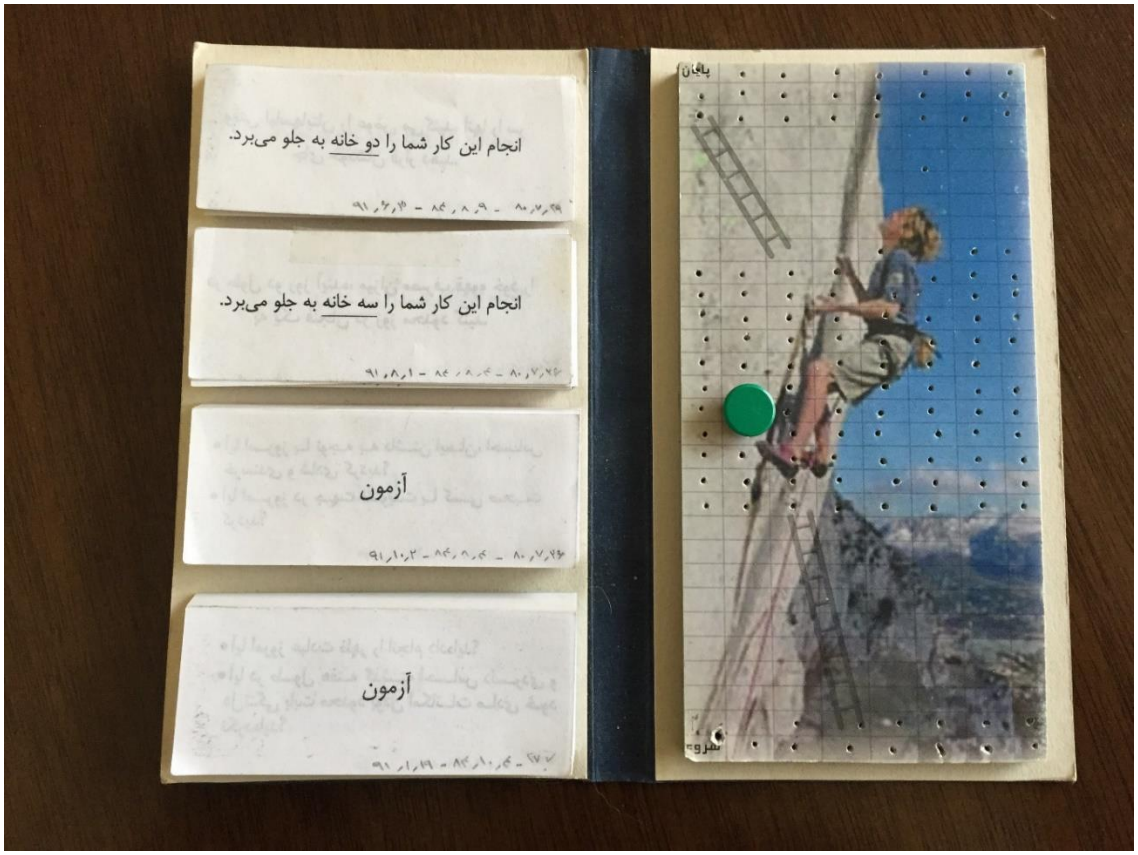
The items I could choose for this exercise were varied. I did this practice for two years – 1998 to 2000 – during which I was struggling with some unusual mental anxiety (I explain about this period of my life in Chapter 6). Because of that, the items I chose for my white cards, blue cards and pink cards were mostly related to being grateful, positive thinking, observing the rights of others, and studying spiritual texts. I chose a prayer practice only when I used green cards and I practiced them for two weeks. Although the program was designed for 32 weeks, I continued the practices for 12 more weeks, working on five selected items, including prayer practices.

Monthly reflections. There were some practices that came in the form of reflection and contemplation. In these practices I needed to think about my thoughts, behaviour, reactions and intentions in different situations and get a better understanding of myself. There was no right or wrong answer to the questions presented in the exercises. I was just supposed to observe myself. Each exercise lasted for 30 days, and I needed to record my observations in a diary every night before going to bed. For example, in one exercise the questions were: What made you happy today, and what made you sad? In another exercise, I wrote one positive and one negative inner voice that I had during the day, and explained why I thought those thoughts or inner voices were positive or negative.

Although none of the monthly exercises were directly focused on prayer and attention, many of my diary entries during practicing those exercises – from 2007 to 2010 – stemmed from my practices of attention-dialogue. Things that made me happy or sad, many inner voices, and most of the reflections on my daily deeds and thoughts came to me when I had my conversations with God, and some of my dairy entries in this period are directly related to my prayer practices.

Snakes and ladders. This exercise was in the form of a board game. There were two sets of practices, written on small papers. The first set was designed for moving two steps and the second set for three steps. I picked a paper every morning and moved ahead on the board if I could successfully complete the task. At the end of the day, I was supposed to reflect on test questions. The test questions appeared as a surprise and focused on the ethical tasks I was responsible for doing on a daily basis as a spiritual student. If I could answer Yes to the questions, I stayed where I was; but I had to move one step back for every question that I answered No. I also needed to choose the practices smartly to get the benefit of ladders. There were two versions of the board games. While in the first one there were only ladders, the second version came with four snakes that I tried to avoid.




انجام این کار شما را دو خانه به جلو می‌برد.
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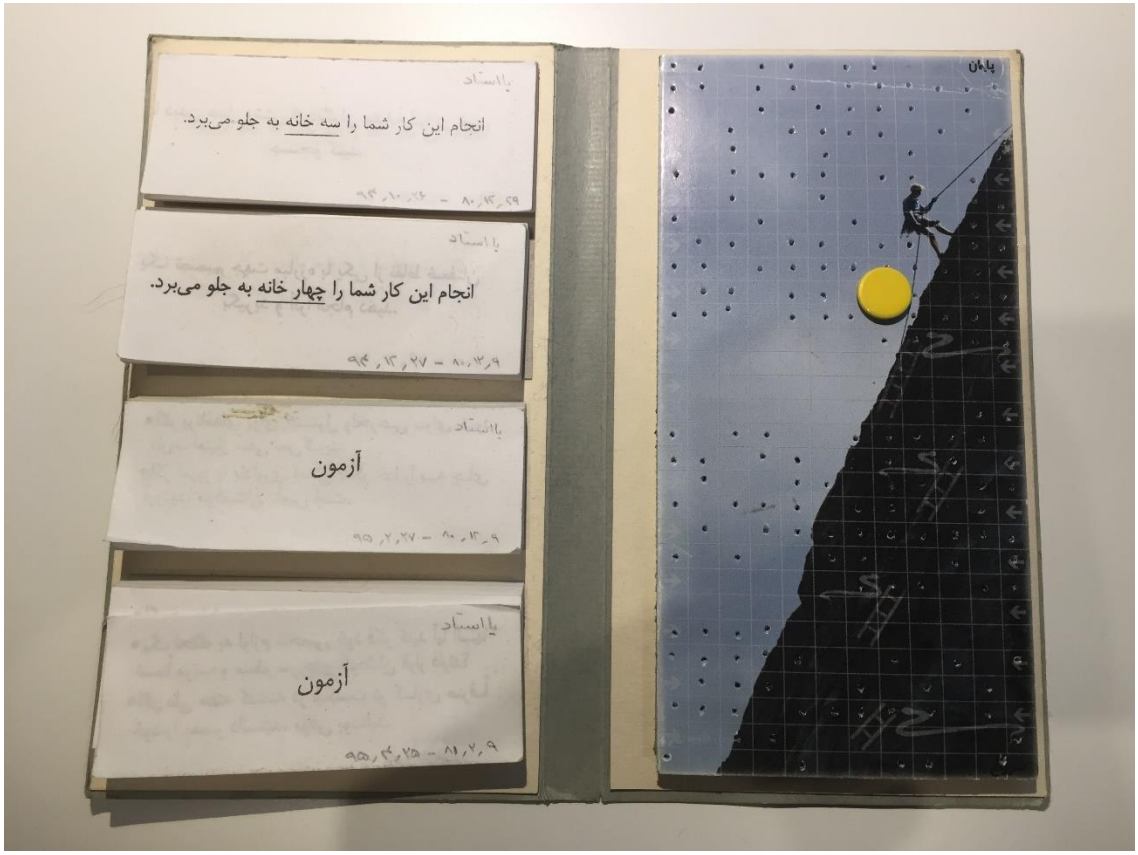
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The exercise was set for 120 days. I practiced it first in 2001; however, the exercise was designed so interestingly that I practiced it again in 2005, 2012, and 2016. Again the tasks I needed to do were selected from a wide range of ethical practices. Occasionally they asked for a practice of attention-dialogue in previously determined times during the day. However, as many of the test items were related to the daily prayer practices, I had to organise my life in a way that I could spend some time praying every day in order not to move backwards at the end of the day when I was placing the pin on the board.

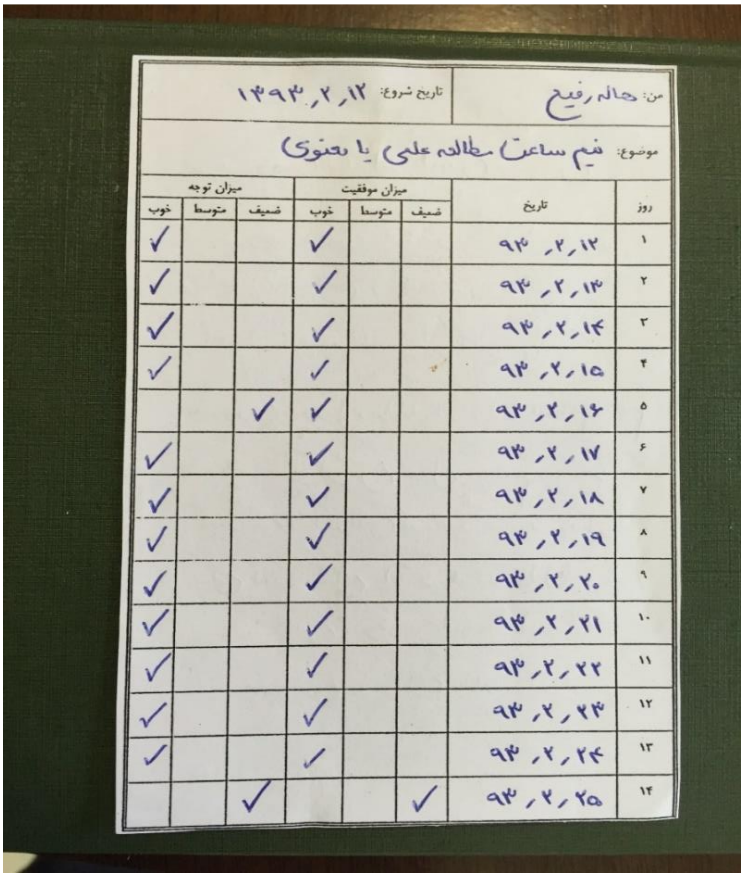
Two-week cards: An in-vivo practice + attention. This exercise primarily was based on spiritual readings. I was supposed to set a practice relying on one of Ostad Elahi's sayings and related to something I thought was important to do in my personal life. I decided upon a practice concerning one of my weak points and planned to do it for two weeks. During the two-week period, I was also supposed to be attentive all day. At the end of each day I ticked one of three boxes – not so good, average, and good – both for the practice and for my attention.

At the back of the card there was a space for me to describe the method with which I practiced the principle. I mentioned there the number of times I had to do something to be able to tick "good" and explained the situations I considered my efforts as "not so good." Since leaving Iran, I have used these cards to practice spiritual exercises I found in Ostad Elahi's websites. I have also used them when I needed to get organized and motivated to finish a task in a fortnight. In order to have a regular prayer practice every day, however, whenever I chose a task that was not related to praying I ticked "good" in the attention column only when I performed the prayer practices I had set for myself.

Name: Date:

Task:

Day	Date	Task			Attention		
		NG	AV	GD	NG	AV	GD
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							
13							
14							



من: هاله رفیع — تاریخ شروع: ۱۲/۲/۹۳

موضوع: نیم ساعت مطالعه علمی یا معنوی

روز	تاریخ	میزان موفقیت			میزان توجه		
		ضعیف	متوسط	خوب	ضعیف	متوسط	خوب
۱	۹۳/۲/۱۲			✓			✓
۲	۹۳/۲/۱۳			✓			✓
۳	۹۳/۲/۱۴			✓			✓
۴	۹۳/۲/۱۵			✓			✓
۵	۹۳/۲/۱۶			✓	✓		
۶	۹۳/۲/۱۷			✓			✓
۷	۹۳/۲/۱۸			✓			✓
۸	۹۳/۲/۱۹			✓			✓
۹	۹۳/۲/۲۰			✓			✓
۱۰	۹۳/۲/۲۱			✓			✓
۱۱	۹۳/۲/۲۲			✓			✓
۱۲	۹۳/۲/۲۳			✓			✓
۱۳	۹۳/۲/۲۴			✓			✓
۱۴	۹۳/۲/۲۵	✓			✓		

Practices in Ostad Elahi's webpages. Since 2012, when I left Iran to live in Spain, my spiritual practices have mostly been primarily based on three official webpages provided for those who follow or are interested in Ostad Elahi's philosophy. The webpages are: Ostadelahi-indepth, Ostadelahi-inpractice, and e-ostadelahi (see the reference list).

Ostadelahi-indepth is a website that invites spiritual students to have a deeper reflection on Ostad Elahi's philosophy by engaging in the website's different modules. Each module consists of one or more cycles with different formats and specific durations. When a module is active, every day I have to answer a question about a certain topic. After answering the question and knowing whether I answered it correctly or not, I need to reflect upon the question all day and modify my behaviour accordingly in relation to people around me and in my daily life. Every four or five days, there is a practice to do based on the questions. The participants' scores are recorded on a graph and I can constantly compare my grades with other students. The last cycle of the module is a final self-assessment based on the concepts presented in all the cycles.

Ostadelahi-inpractice is another website on Ostad Elahi's philosophy that mostly concentrates on the practical aspect of Ostad Elahi's thought and philosophy. It repeatedly reminds students of Ostad Elahi's main teaching that says theory without practice is ineffective (see page 91). The website offers self-managed programs for practicing ethical principles in the form of lab courses. Most labs consist of five phases – pre-assessment, reflection, diagnose, action, and validation – and there are self-diagnosis questionnaires, self-knowledge quizzes, and reflection periods to help students to set programs and choose exercises. In the phase of action, I need to put in practice the tasks I set for myself and record my progress on a diagram on a daily schedule. There is also a log book in which I record specific experiences on doing the tasks and my favourite resources.

There is a lab in this website that is directly related to prayer practices. Named "connecting with the divine," the lab focuses on the purpose of prayer and its role in the process of spiritual perfection. Its aim is to help spiritual students to better understand the effects of prayer and make the practice of prayer a part of their daily life. The duration of the lab is 60 days, in which 23 days should be spent on pre-assessment, reflection and diagnosis and then a 28-day action period begins. After the action phase, students have seven days to review and analyse their progress.

e-ostadelahi is another website that presents different articles on Ostad Elahi's philosophy with a participative approach. This website creates a place for its visitors to exchange their spiritual experiences and their points of views on the presented topics. Beside the sayings of Ostad Elahi, the articles draw upon other sources and introduce ethical exercises that can be practiced by students of different spiritual doctrines. At the end of the article, in the comments, some readers have shared their experiences about practicing the principles presented in the article. Many of the articles are related to the notion of prayer and its practical effects in people's lives.

Data Selection

I have been engaged with Natural Spirituality for more than 20 years and during this time I have gathered many diaries, practice cards, booklets, charts, and internet logbooks that all together make my data for this research. I knew from the beginning that I could not use all my data. Therefore, in order to have a manageable amount of data in the limited space of a PhD thesis, I decided to discuss my experiences as a part of a holistic practice and had to make choices about what to include.

The process of data selection began with exclusion. I excluded routine practices and kept only the most effective. I began to focus on the diaries and saw that after rejection of most of my stories, the ones that remained had a shared characteristic, that is, all of them involved what I interpreted as an epiphany. They were those experiences that became a revelation, even when the revelation stayed ambiguous for ever.

My Spiritual Epiphanies

Investigating epiphany in the modern novel, Morris Beja (1971) brought to light moments of epiphany in works of Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner and gathered definitions that are still used by those who research the topic. Based on the gathered definitions (Beja, 1971), epiphany was seen as a sudden spiritual manifestation, a moment of illumination produced by something apparently trivial, or an event that could make a minute seem like a year.

Epiphany is generally known as a theological term but "it is not necessarily a religious concept" (Beja, 1971, p. 14). Many modern writers have preferred to "detach the notion of epiphany from its original spiritual concept" (Freeman, 2010, p. 242) and see it as "the presence of the wondrous in the ordinary" (Grace, 2014, p. 127) or a phenomenon that refers to a "shift from habitual to extraordinary perception" (Parke, 1999, p. 212). Bone (2007) compares epiphany to "a ray of bright sunshine on a dull day as it pierces through reality to reveal something new" (p. 175). No matter in what context an epiphany is encountered, it is usually considered as a joyful experience, because it has in itself the pleasure of an exceptional realization, and remains a wonder for the discoverer who ponders "how do I know what I see?" (Platt, 2011, p. 59). These are the moments that something is felt toward reaching a new awareness, but cannot be clearly described.

Epiphany is not only a phenomenon but also a cultural discourse (Platt, 2011). Epiphanies can be experienced differently by people of different cultural backgrounds, and its impact and the form of understanding it makes may be varied in different cultural contexts. Therefore, an epiphany can be considered as a cultural discourse and be analysed within a cultural framework.

The term epiphany is also used in contexts of art and science. Such epiphanies are about those moments that a creative idea or a solution to a problem comes to one's mind, apparently out of nowhere and without premeditation. According to Barraclough (2001), most scholars who consider such moments as epiphanies have a Platonic view and believe that "there is a body of beautiful, highly symmetric truth" (p. 1433) that exists independently of themselves, and is discovered rather than created.

In its original context, which is theology or spirituality, epiphanies can also be seen as discoveries. Defined as "experiences of heightened consciousness and ecstatic awareness" (Connolly, 2007, p. 40), epiphanies play an important role in one's spiritual development. Analysing eighty-seven scholarly articles on workplace spirituality, Dent, Higgins, and Wharff (2005) have found that all scholars agreed upon epiphany as being an important element in spiritual development. However, some researchers see spiritual development as "a series of discontinuous awakening experiences" (p. 635) and believe that spiritual development is attained only through epiphanies, while others picture spiritual development as a continuous process in which epiphanies still have an important role, as there are other important elements in the process such as reflective thinking. My definition of epiphany is close to the second group of researchers. Although I had various resources for spiritual growth, my spiritual epiphanies – the discoveries and revelations – have been among the most influential on my spiritual development.

One important characteristic of my spiritual epiphanies was that the discoveries have not been about an outside truth but mostly about my inner self. They always appeared when I least expected them, and had great impacts on my way of life and my future behaviour. After each epiphany, I did not perceive things as I used to, as I looked at the same things around me and saw them differently. Encountering an epiphany, sometimes I could find reasons for things that happened but many times things remained unexplained. In both cases I made sure I recorded the epiphanies in my diaries with all the details. I kept reading back over my writings and, being interested in practical implications of my understandings, I asked myself how I should react to such moments. The epiphanies recorded in my diaries still move me when I think about them and they are still influential in my decisions. I still reflect upon the events, however it is interesting for me that every time I revisit them, I discover something different about them.

To select from my epiphanies, I began with an experience I had in a church that challenged my faith. The experience was related to one of my prayer practices, its effects lasted for a long time after the event and made me redefine my faith. The analysis of that epiphany led me to other related prayer experiences: those that had been answered and appeared like a miracle, and those that remained unanswered and asked for submission. My data selection took more than a year, and was completed only as I moved on with analysis.

An excellent autoethnographical analysis of an epiphany, according to Douglas and Carless (2013), "can serve as a beacon which illuminates anew, not so much by adding to or building onto an existing picture, … but instead by turning on a new light in a new room" (p. 92). In analyses of my epiphanies, I explained how those incidents were revisited differently at a later time, and illustrated how different aspects of the epiphanies "illuminate more general cultural phenomena" (Holman Jones et al., 2015b, p. 23).

Data Analysis

As Patton (2005) explains, "generating useful and credible qualitative findings … requires discipline, knowledge, training, practice, creativity and hard work" (p. 1633). While I knew about discipline and hard work, I needed to expand my knowledge on the methodology to analyse my data effectively and generate credible findings. I had to train myself to be able to do autoethnography practically and systematically, to explore and explain what was underlying or broader in my data and "'distil' essence, meanings, norms, orders, patterns, rules … and structures" (Rapley, 2011, p. 276).

After I selected the experiences I wanted to write about, I began my analysis by freewriting. I transformed my thoughts and experiences into words to be able to inscribe them "with form and solidity" (Rapley, 2011, p. 286). Following Ellis' (2000) suggestion, I wrote "a draft of my story" (p. 751) trying to locate my voice by "freely verbalizing" my view of things (Colyar, 2013, p. 366). I explained why the experiences were epiphanies and wrote about what was happening "within and alongside" the experiences (Adams et al., 2015, p. 71).

The themes appeared when I was making a structure for my writing and elaborating on the key ideas in the incidents. I noticed that my writing repeatedly referred to the notions of faith / doubt, being Othered, and taking dignified risks. It was then that I decided to choose the "thematic analysis of narrative" (Ellis, 2004, p. 195) for my autoethnography. I also tried to relate my stories to my theoretical framework and the philosophical ideas of Ostad Elahi. My aim in putting the stories and the theory into direct conversation was to enable my autoethnographic text to "pose a challenge to entrenched beliefs, experiences, and ways of understanding" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 90) both for myself and for readers.

According to P. Gardner (2014), "autoethnography differs from autobiography because it requires the researcher to engage in critical reflexivity rather than descriptive narrative" (p. 234). In P. Gardner's (2014) autoethnography, "critical reflexivity is located around the problematized self, with poetry being the means to achieve a clearer view of identity" (p. 234). I, however, engaged in critical reflexivity by contemplating my later reflections on particular experiences in my diaries, posing questions to my behaviours, and developing different interpretations of my reactions. I looked for the hidden aspects of my decisions by searching for the true intentions behind my actions. I also looked for the modifications that happened to my personality and identity after each experience by reviewing my later behaviours in similar situations. With reference to my diaries, I explained about my different emotional reactions every time I revisited the incidents at a later time and investigated how the incident affected my understandings or behaviour. Then, with reference to different places the experience was revisited, I expanded my writing to highlight its cultural aspects.

Among the representational forms introduced in Adams et al. (2015), I found myself closest to expressionist autoethnographers who "use story as the mechanism for interpretation and analysis" and "use writing to examine and move through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty with the goal of making life better" (p. 87). And again, among the expressionist autoethnographers I found myself closest to writing "confessional research accounts" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 88) that focus on the researchers' particular experiences and their transformations. As Chang (2008) explains, in their "confessional tales" (p. 142) autoethnographers honestly display their personal biases, character flaws, or bad habits to clarify their arguments. This was necessary in my autoethnography to delve within my inner self and move toward a better self-knowledge.

Autoethnographers, like most qualitative researchers, have different ways of analysing data (Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Spry, 2011a). As Barbour (2008) states, while the design in quantitative research relies on a roughly linear model, "flexibility is the hallmark of qualitative research" (p. 33). The flexible characteristic of the qualitative study gave me the freedom to have a research design that was open to change as the data were analysed. Thus, although my style of autoethnographic writing is close to Chang's (2008) "analytical-interpretive" (p. 146) and I basically use "thematic analysis of narrative" (Ellis, 2004, p. 195) to analyse data, I created my own steps of analysis. The process of analysis I explained above can be summarized in the following steps.

Six Steps of Data Analysis

1. **Creating themes.** To interpret and analyse my data, and as a meaning making process, I began my analysis with "creating themes for the ideas" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 66) in my stories. The themes were emerged after a "holistic reading of data" (Chang, 2008, p. 132) where I continually searched for reasons behind my actions and asked how I reacted to my cultural surroundings. Then I developed the themes by identifying their properties and dimensions, and highlighted how each theme implied, influenced, included, and gave meaning to other themes. As my research takes the form of expressionist autoethnography (Adams, et al., 2015), I focused on my internal feelings, emotions, and intentions in creating themes in order to present my personal experiences "from a thoroughly subjective perspective" (Adams, et al., 2015, p. 87).

2. **Connecting with others.** When autoethnographers find themselves writing about an experience, they also connect with experiences of "others of similarity" (Chang, 2008, p. 134) with whom they can identify, and "others of difference" (Chang, 2008, p. 134) who are from different communities. Thus, in the second step of analysis I connected the created themes to wider perspectives and illustrated how they could reciprocally add to each other. I linked my personal experiences to the empirical knowledge generated through the observations and analyses of other researchers in larger contexts (Adams, et al., 2015). I also examined other relevant personal and cultural texts, including novels and films, and used these texts to determine how my stories contribute to, complement, and contrast with others' experiences.

3. **Highlighting the cultural aspects.** In the third step of analysis, I highlighted the relationship of my experiences to culture and different cultural practices. I studied myself, both as a person and as a researcher, in relation to culture by reflecting on the nuances of my epiphanies and showing how my experiences illuminated more general cultural phenomena. As power relations were important parts of the cultural relationships, I also recreated some details of my lived experience to "explicitly acknowledge [my] research in relation to power" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 29).

4. **Illustrating the transformative aspects.** In the fourth step, I showed in my analysis how the epiphanies transformed me and called me to question my beliefs and understandings. I illustrated how and why these particular experiences challenged my thoughts and beliefs, how they grabbed hold of me and would not let go, and how they had the possibility of transformation.

5. **Theorizing.** To combine the language of theory – from the theoretical framework in the second chapter – with my language of analysis, I used the technique of "citationality" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 91). Citationality focuses on the poetics of theory by treating theory as an available language as researchers write their stories. This approach uses citation or the quoting of texts as a means for articulating ideas, feelings, and conclusions. In my analysis I used B. Elahi's (1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1997; 1999; 2001; 2005; 2007; 2009) words in my work, combining my language with his and citing his works in the main text. I tried to move seamlessly between my voice and the language of theory, poetically merging stories and theory so that the stories become "theory in action" (Adams et al., 2015, pp. 91-92).

6. **Reflexivity.** In the last step I worked on reflexivity by turning back on my experiences and relationships in order to consider how they influence my present work. I accounted for my different identities, limitations, and perspectives, trying to show how I was an audience to my own experiences. I illustrated that while I used my experiences to offer insight into cultural experiences, the way I made sense of these experiences was "not the *only* way to make sense of them" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 30).

As Patton (2005) states, the fruit of any qualitative research is that it yields patterns and themes. This is one other way qualitative research might contribute to knowledge. Although the steps of analysis explained above are a personal way of autoethnographic analysis, it can easily provide a new pattern that can be used by other researchers, especially those who are also interested in investigating the notion of spirituality.

Evaluating Autoethnography

We live in a time where many researchers in social sciences show interest in self-narratives inquiries, partly because of the recognition of postmodern ideas that value subjectivity in research (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is among self-focused methodologies that have grown in popularity. There is now an increasing number of published articles, chapters, books, book series, conferences, and critiques that showcase or discuss autoethnography (Ellis, 2015, p. 10). However, autoethnographers still need to make an extra effort to prove the validity and trustworthiness of their research.

In the past four decades, autoethnography has been criticized for not being analytic or scientific enough, for not being sufficiently rigorous or theoretical, and for lacking "reliability, generalizability, and validity" (Denzin, 2014, p. 70). Critics of autoethnography claim that first-person narration introduces partiality and bias; that autobiographic work cannot be assessed for its scholarly insight; and that including storytelling in research "sacrifices the analytic purpose of scholarship" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 100). However, as Denzin (2014) observes, "autoethnography cannot be judged by traditional positivist criteria" (p. 70), as its goal is not to produce a standard social science research, but "to write performance texts in a way that moves others to ethical action" (Denzin, 2014, p. 70).

Adams et al. (2015) consider four categories of goals that can be used for evaluating autoethnographies. According to these goals, to assess the value and success of an autoethnography one should ask: how an autoethnography contributes to knowledge; how it values the personal and experiential; how it demonstrates the power, craft, and responsibilities of stories and storytelling; and how it takes "a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation" (p. 102).

To respond to the above categories, in my analysis I share my spiritual experiences in different contexts with others to extend the existing knowledge on the notion of spirituality. I explore my experiences as a means of insight about social life by "recognizing and embracing the risks of presenting *vulnerable selves* in research" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 103). I describe and critique culture in my analysis, and illustrate the processes I use to create understanding. I look at my work as an "opportunity to engage and improve the lives" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 104) of myself and the readers of my thesis.

Truth value in qualitative research is subject-oriented. Thus, instead of assuming the existence of a single tangible reality, qualitative researchers think of the idea of multiple realties (Krefting, 1991). I am aware that in analysing my stories I represent only one aspect of reality. However, in order to create trustworthy autoethnographic stories, I observe "narrative rationality" (Adams et al., 2015, P. 95) in order for my analysis to have the ability to be applied to similar contexts which are outside the study situation (Krefting, 1991).

Ethics

One of the most difficult challenges in doing an autoethnography is dealing with the issue of writing ethically. Like all qualitative researchers, autoethnographers should "make ethical decisions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 119) in their research. As Adams et al. (2015) explain, "although autoethnographies may not always fall under the purview of institutional review board and approval process, researchers must adhere to the basic ethical principles and guidelines for conducting research" (p. 56). While ethical considerations for most qualitative researchers are mostly related to the participants, in some kinds of autoethnographies, where the only participant is the researcher, the focus of ethics shifts to other matters.

Autoethnography requires researchers to examine both their own and other people's experiences and relationships. Therefore, "the *personal* risks of doing autoethnography can be significant" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 63). Autoethnographers write about their own lives and try to fix the lens on themselves in their stories; however, there are always other people involved in each story. People about whom I write in this autoethnography are mostly family members and friends. As an autoethnographer, I know that I am responsible for all those that I write about, and I have taken special considerations in my writing.

When I wrote about others, by using "pseudonyms or composite characters" (Ellis, 2004, p. 152), I made sure that their names and relationships to me were not identifiable. Whenever possible, I committed myself to take my story back to them to read and approve before writing them in the thesis. Ellis (2004) argues that "If we don't take our work back to those we write about, we better have very good reasons for not doing so" (p. 145). If it was not possible to take my work back to those I wrote about, I always assumed that everyone I wrote about would eventually read what I wrote, so I anticipated their reaction, and wrote consciously with the best intention not to harm them (see Ellis, 2007).

Another issue considering ethics in doing an autoethnography is writing truthfully. This is a complicated issue as there is never one truth to write about. No matter how much I tried to be faithful to facts that have happened, I have to accept that what I wrote in my analysis is only my perspective of the truth, since "just 'being there' is insufficient as any guarantee of truth" (Gannon, 2006, p. 491). I am also aware that my memory is "fluid and fallible" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 95); I may be able to remember only my emotional impressions of an experience, and most probably every time I remember a past event, I remember it with slight differences. I also acknowledge that I am "controlling the image" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 10) I present by deciding which face of the truth to show.

Discussing some ethical pitfalls in representation, Spry (2011a) warns autoethnographers not to go to the extreme of presenting themselves as "the hero" or "the victim" (p. 137). Autoethnographers should not picture themselves as heroes, and in the analysis of their "oppressive acts" (Spry, 2011a, p. 137), they must write with humility. Autoethnographers must also be careful not to frame themselves as victims when they focus on the ways inequity and injustice affect them. Instead, they need to make an effort to "move the analysis deeper into critically examining the sociocultural systems" (Spry, 2011a, p. 137).

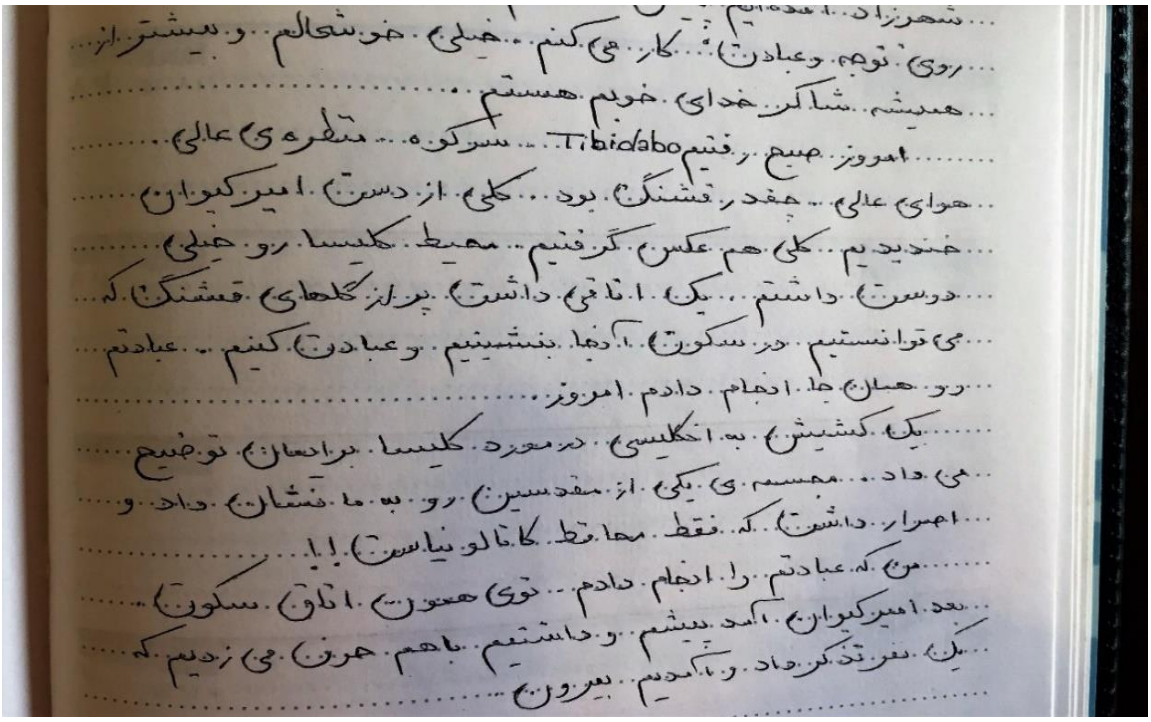
Autoethnographers should also avoid shaming and blaming both themselves and others as they "can establish an irreconcilable block" (Spry, 2011a, p. 135) in their critical self –reflection. Spry (2011a) asks autoethnographers that instead of seeking to prove they would never perform these ethical pitfalls, they "critically reflect upon the how/why/where in which [they] enact these unethical methods of representation" (p. 135).

Ellis (2004) describes the "ethic of care" in operating an autoethnography as acting like public journalists who are "committed to the public good, their right to know, and to doing no harm" (p. 149). But she also confesses that concepts like "do no harm" and "public good" cannot be easily recognized (Ellis, 2004, p. 149). Ellis (2004) suggests using composite characters as an ethical technique, but she acknowledges that one then may lose the "power of story" by changing it to something different (p. 175). All in all, I needed to use ethical techniques so that by publishing my work no harm will come to those I wrote about, including myself. Protection of self is an important part of an autoethnography as the harms might come both after publishing and at the time of writing, where "revisiting the pain" (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010, p. 10) is necessary or inevitable.

In order to protect myself and others, there was a need to "fictionalize details in a way that camouflages the actual event but still conveys the meaning" (Ellis, 2004. p. 152). As Gannon (2006) argues, an autoethnography "with its omissions, disguises, and representations of reality [is] closer to the art of fiction than is often acknowledged" (p. 477). However, as an ethical autoethnographer, I had to decide what to include and what to exclude, find the balance between being "ethically open and honest and real", and to the best of my ability "create probable, trustworthy, and resonant autoethnographic tales" (Adams et al., 2015, pp. 95-96). Good ethical autoethnography must find the balance here.

In the upcoming chapters, I share some of my life stories with those who read my account to inscribe my own feelings, to evoke the same emotions in my readers, and more than this, to "create a live, charged *exchange* with an audience" (Holman Jones, 2002, p. 51). I hope by sharing my own story I can also break down barriers to talking about or researching spirituality.

Prologue



… I am working on the practice of "prayer-attention." I am very happy and more than ever grateful to my dear God.

We went to Tibidabo today. On top of the mountain. Wonderful view. Wonderful weather. How beautiful it was. We laughed a lot at [my brother's] jokes. We took a lot of pictures, too. I loved the atmosphere of the church. There was a room full of beautiful flowers in which we could sit down quietly and pray. I did my prayer there today.

There was a priest there who explained for us about the church in English. He showed a statue of a saint and insisted on him protecting only Catalonia!!

I did my prayers anyway. In the same quiet room. Then [my brother] came in. We were talking when someone asked us to be quiet and we left the room.

Chapter 5 – An Epiphany

Above is a picture taken from one of my diaries and its English translation (my own translation). By sharing the extract from my diary with readers I intend to show, in an intimate way, how I use my raw data to explore what is underlying my writings. The extract refers to an event I experienced when I was living in Spain and my brother, whom I had not seen for a few years, came from Canada for a visit. The experience happened in a Catholic church when we went to a beautiful place in Barcelona (Tibidabo) to make the best of our time together. It was also the time I was spiritually working on a 28-day exercise of "connecting with the divine" (see page 106).

This chapter is an autoethnographic analysis of an epiphany or a thought-provoking experience among my prayer practices using the theoretical framework of Ostad Elahi's (B. Elahi, 1997) philosophy of Natural Spirituality. I begin the chapter with the abbreviated account of the experience, using extracts from my diary. The story serves as a general frame of reference for the analysis, as my analysis provides more detail and insight.

I then proceed with a section on my personal understanding of the exercises of prayer-attention in Natural Spirituality. As a background for the autoethnographic analysis, in this part I elaborate on my spiritual position and the effect of my past on my ability to pray. Then, in the next section, I introduce three themes (faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk) that were developed through the process of analysis. I write on each theme separately and explain how these themes came to exist, what meanings they created within the experience, and how they were related to the cultural backgrounds and my path of self-knowledge. These themes are revisited and used as analytical devices for the analysis of the stories that appear in Chapters 6 and 7.

The next part of the chapter provides an autoethnographic analysis of the experience, which is based on Ellis' (2004) "thematic analysis of narrative" (p. 195) and partly uses B. Elahi's (2001) process of assimilating ethical principles as theoretical framework (see page 42). In this section, I present an analysis which is interwoven with other research in order to provide a broader cultural interpretation. In the analysis, I explain how the experience has been revisited in later reflections, and how it has helped me to reinvent my faith, to come to different knowledge of my inner self, and change my reactions, behaviour and attitudes accordingly.

The chapter ends with a conclusion where I summarise the key points and explain how they are related to and revisited in the following chapters.

The Story

This story is a true account (true from my memory, perspective and interpretation). I consider this experience as an epiphany because it was one of "those remarkable and out of the ordinary life-changing experiences" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 26) of mine. It was followed by a "sudden illumination" (Tigges, 1999, p. 12) that called me to question some of my beliefs, motivated me to change some of my reactions, and made me look at my prayer practices, even those that had happened before this experience, from a different perspective. Many times, when I had new experiences, I reflected and wrote my new insights referring to this event in my diary, and explained how it affected my thoughts and decisions in different situations. In writing my story, I draw on some fiction writing techniques to construct sequences of events, "holding back on interpretation" (Richardson, 2000, p. 931) and asking readers to relive the experience emotionally along with me.

Spain: Only Catalonia!

On 19 March 2012 we decided to go to Tibidabo, which is a beautiful mountain overlooking Barcelona. Atop the mountain, there is a Roman Catholic Church (Sagrat Cor Church, or "The Sacred Heart of Jesus") which is crowned by a huge statue of Jesus opening his hands as if he is going to embrace and welcome all the visitors. Going to church on that day meant a lot to me, because I planned to do my spiritual practice of "prayer-attention" there. I wanted to have the church as my outside setting and get help from its celestial atmosphere to concentrate and pray for a few minutes. I had had previous emotional experiences of praying in churches and was looking forward to having another loving conversation with God in Tibidabo.

We entered the church and were watching with amazement the stained glass and rose windows when a priest came to us and, in English, asked us if we wanted some explanations on the pictures and statues in the church, an offer which we happily accepted. We had not met many people in Barcelona who could speak English when we were visiting other places and the priest's offer came to us as a positive surprise. In his explanations about the sculpture of *Sant Jordi*, the priest mentioned that it was the statue of the patron saint of Catalonia. I did not know much about the particular missions of Saints in Christianity and naively asked if he protected the people "of" Catalonia or the people who are "in" Catalonia, including us at the moment. The priest stated that he protected the people "of" Catalonia, with an emphasis on the word "of." I said again that as a saint, he could probably offer his protection to us as well that day even though we were not from Catalonia, simply because we were guests in the church and saints by definition are kind to "all."

I also told the priest that I was expecting to be protected as I was going to pray there in the church although I was not a Christian. But as his smile was fading on his face, the priest, who was either angry, annoyed or disappointed (I could not know for certain), mentioned firmly that the church really belonged "only" to Roman Catholic Christians, and the saint protected "only" the people of Catalonia.

I was discouraged a little bit, but I did not change my mind about praying in the church. When we departed from the priest, I found a "quiet room" designated for praying. It was full of beautiful flowers and there were a few other people who were praying there. I sat down on one of the front benches and tried to clear my mind, looking at the statue of the Crucified Christ. I tried to begin a conversation, addressing Jesus Christ, but I could not stop thinking about whether he listened to me. I was completely distracted and that day's prayer was a silent one, silent even in my mind.

My Practices of Prayer-Attention

For me, prayer has become the aesthetic practice of crafting meaning.
Being in performance studies
has taught me about faith.
At the beginning of rehearsal,
one is always afraid,
vulnerable,
and hoping to believe.
Even, and especially when,
we don't think we will ever make present
what seems so absent. (Spry, 2011a, p. 21)

Prayer is generally encouraged in Iranian culture and petitionary prayer is a common activity among many Iranians. From my observations, a large number of people in Iran ask for God's help in difficult situations and wish for good things to happen both for themselves and their loved ones. I remember praying as a child, following the Islamic ritual, but I cannot remember exactly when and why I stopped. My adolescent prayers were limited to occasional short informal conversations with God, addressing Him as a friend. I asked for His help in difficult situations, like when I had exams or when there was a family problem, but I never treated God as a wish granting object and I never complained when my wishes did not come true. Although I had a relatively difficult childhood, I was a happy girl. I did not expect much and was grateful with what I had. Later, mainly under the influence of anti-religious books I read and because of the negative experiences I had living in a religious society, I lost my faith, lost all interest in religion and spirituality, and stopped praying completely.

With Ostad Elahi's scientific look at spirituality I began to get interested in spirituality again. Engaged with Natural Spirituality, I passionately practiced the spiritual exercises, setting goals for myself and recorded my failures, successes, and progresses, drawing charts and graphs. Getting to know Persian mystic poetry and philosophy also added to my interest. I liked the way mysticism deconstructed religious ideas (Rumi, 1979). Like many mystics, Ostad Elahi taught his followers that in spirituality "content (meaning) is more relevant than form" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 140), and one needs to search for God "within himself" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 209). While imitating a saint or a religious scholar without reasoning is a desirable part of some religions, Ostad Elahi encouraged his students to set aside blind imitation, increase their knowledge, grow "greater interest in research" (B. Elahi, 2009, p. 80), and "approach spirituality with a rational mind" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. xxii).

To me, the most appealing part of Natural Spirituality was the ethical exercises because they had a pragmatic approach to spirituality and went beyond theory. The spiritual exercises reformed my behaviour and my attitude towards life from early on and I could tangibly feel the change in me. However, I was not motivated to practice some of the exercises, including prayer practices. Although in Natural Spirituality the emphasis is on "natural meditation" in which students should try to perform their human duty while "constantly feeling His presence" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 25), it is still necessary "to devise and regularly practice a structured program of prayer" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 164). It is advised that students have a conversation with the Source at particular hours during the day trying "to recite the words with presence of mind" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 164).

Believing that praying was good for my soul, I tried to put prayer-attention exercises in my daily program. But I often missed the times of prayer or postponed doing the exercise until late at night. I needed to go through a long encouraging dialogue with myself to do my prayers each and every time. I very much liked reciting "Ostad Elahi's Universal Prayer" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 231) in my practices of prayer-attention:

> O Unique, Peerless, Living, All-Powerful
> O Necessary Being, Creator of all and encompassing all
> Most Merciful, most Munificent
> It is you that I adore and to you that I turn
>
> I implore you to forgive the countless misdeeds throughout my life
> And to always guide me on the straight path
> The path that will lead me to you
> And return me to the Source from which I came

Educate me and direct me in such way
That you will be pleased with me in this world and the next
And do not allow me to seek, commit, or confront
Anything that is contrary to your satisfaction

Finally, in accordance with my faith
I ask for your mercy, grace, and blessing
For my parents and for all of humanity
And indeed for the whole creation.

I found the prayer selfless and comprehensive. It was almost everything I wanted to say to God. I recited the prayer with enthusiasm; and although I had already said "It is you that I adore and to you that I turn" I informally told Him at the end "Thank you for everything, and I love you." However, after a while I could not always find the enthusiasm in me. I memorised the prayer and could recite it by heart, but sometimes I could not concentrate on the words I was saying. I often caught myself being distracted in the middle of my prayers, my thoughts wandering here and there. I lost motivation for praying because I thought I could never do it the way I was supposed to.

Natural Spirituality expected me to search for the reasons for my failures in the exercises, so I began investigating. The prayer exercises were flexible enough. I did not have to pray at a certain time and I could choose my own prayer times according to my daily schedule. Reciting Ostad Elahi's prayer was suggested for praying, but it was not obligatory, and I could praise God in my prayers in whatever way my heart desired. I knew by reading mystic texts that "the rites and modes of praise [were] not important" (Lewis, 2008, p. 373) when one wanted to communicate with God. So the problem was not in the exercises and my failures in prayer exercises rooted in another place.

I had to look for the reasons inside and find the related weak points in me. I asked myself: "Why do I postpone my prayer exercises in spite of believing in their benefits in my life?" Pondering over the question, I noticed that I had the same approach toward doing similar beneficial things in my personal life, like practicing my piano lessons or taking my daily walk. To be honest with myself, I could not complain about the lack of time. I could always find time for doing things I wanted to do. Thus, in my diaries, I referred to lack of will power, lack of motivation, and being disorganized as three main reasons for my failures in prayer exercises. To respond properly to my self-analysis, I decided to practice prayer exercises not only to connect with the Source and obtain metacausal energy, but also to fight my imperious self and be more organised in my life.

Most of my prayer practices – named either prayer-attention, attention-dialogue, or connecting with the divine – consisted of intimate conversations I had with God that had a general effect on my way of life, but did not stand individually in my mind. Nevertheless, there have been some life-changing experiences among my prayer exercises that strikingly modified my beliefs and clearly remained in my memory. Searching for "recurring topics, themes, and patterns" (Chang, 2008, p. 131) in these outstanding prayer experiences, I found three themes that were implied either in the experiences or in my later reflections on them. First, I observed that the experiences contained several references to the notions of faith and doubt. Second, looking for "cultural themes" (Chang, 2008, p. 132) in experiences, I found references to being socially, culturally, or spiritually Othered. And third, in a search to "identify exceptional occurrences" (Chang, 2008, p. 133), I could find traces of a dignified risk in my decisions related to the experiences. In the next part I concisely discuss and define these theme.

Three Themes: Faith / Doubt, Being Othered, and Dignified Risk

The themes that are discussed in this part were brought into relief through "the interconnected processes of critical self-reflection, narrative writing and analysis" (Piemonte, 2010, p. 31). When I began to turn my diary entries into stories – deliberating over my later reflections for each experience – and looking for recurring themes in the first step of analysis, I found these themes emerging from my sporadic writings. In this part, I explain my perspectives on the themes and provide personal details and background related to each of them in order to make the later analysis more reader-friendly and more communicable.

Faith and Doubt

> My Father, and my Brother, and my God!
> Steel me with patience! Soften me with grief!
> Let blow the trumpet strongly while I pray,
> Till this embattled wall of unbelief
> My prison, not my fortress, fall away!
> Then, if thou willest, let my day be brief,
> So Thou wilt strike Thy glory thro' the day. (Tennyson, 1968, p. 3)

I explained the utility of faith from Ostad Elahi's point of view in Chapter 2, and reviewed the recent arguments on faith and doubt in Chapter 3. Here, I examine the notions of faith and doubt from a personal perspective. I explain how I became interested in Natural Spirituality, how my faith took shape, how I worked to strengthen the faith in me, and how I dealt with my doubts and questions that came to my mind.

Considering my cultural background, one might not be surprised if I say I started following Natural Spirituality with complete doubt. Growing up in a country I consider as religiously dogmatic, I had experienced things that made me look at anything related to religion and spirituality with suspicion. I was sceptical and had reservations; however, I was also curious about and interested in Natural Spirituality's scientific approach which did not ask for uncritical imitation and did not try to disturb my reverence to individuality. In many forms of religion and spirituality, doubt "is a mind-set that's neither encouraged, common, nor comfortable" (Coyne, 2015, p. 38). But in Natural Spiritualty, faith and reason were not seen "as opposed to one another" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 37). In what I understood, doubt in Natural Spirituality was accepted as an inherent part of belief. There is a kind of doubt that comes from "a wide-ranging intellect" (B. Elahi, 1993b, p. 138) and helps truth seekers constantly reason and make comparisons along their spiritual path; and someone who continues working on one's humanity even in the face of doubts "has more merit" (B. Elahi, 1993b, p. 138) than a person who is without any doubts.

I might say I had just enough faith to motivate me to begin and investigate. I started with reading Ostad Elahi's sayings (B. Elahi, 1987; B. Elahi, 1995) gathered by his son, and put question marks next to theoretical subjects I did not understand or could not logically accept. Later, when I read Bahram Elahi's books on foundations of Natural Spirituality (1997; 1999) and became more familiar with the scientific approach, I decided to experiment with some of the objective spiritual laws that I could not understand. For example, I chose the following spiritual law: "if someone, despite all his efforts, is about to yield to a temptation of the imperious self, he will definitely receive concrete help to resist that temptation provided that he asks God for help and his God is the 'God of the time'" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 42).

Following the suggested steps for experimentation took me years. I needed to work to gain "necessary faculties for experimentation" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 41). I had to get some knowledge of my imperious self in order to recognise its temptations. I had to learn some "methods for effectively struggling against a particular temptation" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 42). I needed to understand the meaning of God of the time. And finally, I had to move beyond theory and get into practice. I practiced the above law several times, and did not fail even once. When I sincerely tried to fight my imperious self and saw that all my efforts were not enough and I asked for help, I received the concrete help. I erased the question mark the third time I experimented with the law, as the first two times I thought it might have been accidental.

The concept of faith does not solely belong to the spiritual domain. One needs to have faith "approaching [any] scientific discipline" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 49), as there is no motivation without faith. I believed in the validity of Ostad Elahi's scientific discipline, but I did not wait for an absolute faith or a complete understanding of all theories to proceed with practicing ethical principles. Faith grew in me as I experienced more, learned more, and got more knowledge of my self. I was changing, and the more I noticed the changes that occurred in my personality, the stronger my faith became. Every time I got a clearer idea of a concept, I erased the question mark I had previously put in books. The question marks never completely disappeared but I felt that "even without comprehensive answers" (Costello, 2016, p. 258), I still believed. I could easily identify with Handelman (2002) when he wrote: "I still don't know how Job found comfort after all his tribulations, and I still don't understand God's answer to Job and I don't understand a lot of what God does, but being here in Jerusalem, one is fortified in faith despite all the difficulties [and] conflict" (p. 227).

Being Othered

I went to school (first grade) when I was only five years old, one year earlier than other children go to school in Iran. I could already read and write so my parents thought it was a good idea to send me to school earlier. While my parents were proud of my talent and happy that I was ahead of other children in reading and writing, for me there was nothing to be happy about. I was practically the youngest student in the school, a little five-year-old girl without friends. I still remember when I stood watching children play dodgeball. Nobody wanted me in their group because I was too small to throw the ball fast and was not strong enough to catch the ball when it was thrown toward me.

I spent the first ten years of my life in Esfahan, a (then) small city in Iran. My family and I moved to Tehran, the capital city, in 1982. I expected the first day of school in the new city to be difficult because I did not know anyone in the school, but things went much further. The very first day at school, when I began to answer a question, the whole class burst in laughter. They laughed at my dialect. I looked at the teacher, expected her to be angry with the students' reaction, but she had a smile on her face. She just teamed up with the rest of the students. I did not talk in school for the whole year.

The list can almost endlessly go on with my experiences. Not only when I lived in a foreign country, but also in my own country and sometimes in the circle of my family and friends I happened to be Othered because of my gender, age, social class, nationality, language, religion, beliefs, thoughts, or simply by not having a particular skill. The process of Othering, in most of my cases, began when people expected me to have a preferred identity, or an approved way of being, doing, saying and knowing (Yandell, 2008; Wilson & Rennie, in press), and treated me as an Other when I did not or refused to have it.

My experiences of being Othered were always hurtful and I never got thick-skinned, no matter how many times I experienced it. However, they taught me valuable life lessons that helped me see the "subjective construct" (Weiguo, 2013, p. 162) of cultural differences and look for its footprints in my own reactions. I tried to trace when, where, and in what context I was willing to Other people under the cultural influence, and made an effort to choose alternative behaviour in such situations. It was surprising for me to see no matter how much I had suffered by being Othered, it was still enormously difficult to avoid doing it toward others. I have failed in many occasions, either consciously or unconsciously. I still fail sometimes; but I can detect my improvements through time, reading my diary entries.

Dignified Risk

The risks I discuss in my analysis in this thesis have been either socio-cultural or spiritual. They were "dignified" because there was a good intention behind them. They have been decisions made while I was experiencing dilemmas; when I had to choose between staying in a stable and safe situation, and leaving the safe space to learn something, move forward and make improvements.

By taking the dignified risks I always made myself subject to uncertainty, as there was no guarantee that things changed for better. Risk, by definition, is generally accompanied by "the possibility of occurrence of undesirable influences on human life" (Yumiko, 2010, p. 167). Every time I took a risk I could be left with worse or even nothing at the end. There was always the possibility that I lose my safe place and make no improvements in my life. However, taking risks was sometimes inevitable if I wanted to grow and refine my life (Klasing, 2014).

The dignified risks I discuss in this thesis have also been a form of resistance to the dominant discourse. To me, the dominant discourse has been the authority who, as Foucault (2002) explains, interrogated me or posed questions as "a way of exercising power" (p. 48). By authority, I mean people who had the power to impose their ideas on me and threaten to treat me as an outcast if I did not listen to them. They could be doctors when I was a patient, teachers when I was a student, family members whom I was expected to respect, and sometimes friends with whom I needed to agree at all times. At times, I intentionally and consciously made myself an Other by either not being in the right place or not acting in the right way. Immediately after taking a risk, I lost my previously stable position and then I had to fight to gain what I wanted. Therefore, I became a resister through taking these risks every time I moved out of my comfort zone and acted, thought or even believed differently from what I was expected by people around me.

The Autoethnographic Analysis

In Natural Spirituality, "thought" is considered as "a flux of energy" and thus has a certain "materiality" (B. Elahi, 2001, pp. 69-70). Therefore, any flux of thought can be "detectable, measurable, and analysable" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 74), and an analysis of samples of thought can provide information for the nature of one's identity and its transformation.

Analysing samples of my thoughts takes the form of autoethnographic analysis in this section. I use some autoethnographic tools to uncover the hidden aspects of my decisions and intentions, explore various explanations for an experience, and articulate its different impacts on my personality and identity.

The Analysis

"Writing a story" is a way that analysis takes place in narrative. In writing their stories, people "employ analytic techniques to interpret their worlds" (Ellis, 2004, p. 196). However, as an autoethnographer, I could add another layer of analysis to my story "by stepping back from the text" (Ellis, 2004, p. 196) and theorising about it from a spiritual perspective. Following the steps of analysis explained in methodology chapter, in this section I use what Ellis (2004) calls a "thematic analysis of content" (p. 196) to discuss the created themes. I use snippets of the story to demonstrate each theme, and in order to elaborate on the life-changing feature of the story, I use other texts from my personal experiences, a friend's personal experience, a novel I read, and a movie I watched.

Faith / doubt. In Natural Spirituality, the process of spiritual perfection is an internal matter that each person must voluntarily pursue, and involves "the 'whys' that lead to making decisions and performing actions" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 112). Faith, in this process, is the motivating force that regardless of its strength, "does not provide us with certainty" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 149). The experience I had in the church that day challenged my faith in praying. After the priest's explanations, my mind was full of questions and I doubted if it was really necessary to pray. The effect of the doubt that day remained in me for some time. I continued my exercise of prayer-attention, but was distracted in my prayer practices in the days after; and when the 28-day period of the practice was over I stopped doing praying exercises for some time. I told myself that there was no need for having a conversation to pray, as my good deeds could be considered as a sort of prayer. I had this idea because a known theme in Islamic mysticism is that prayer is but being helpful to others (Sadi, 1950).

At the same time, I could not stop thinking about the reasons the priest's few words could eradicate all my enthusiasm in praying. I was reminded of those days I looked at religions and spirituality suspiciously. The priest challenged my beliefs by representing a dogmatic faith that I had, in a way, left behind. To regain motivation, I needed to redefine my faith; therefore, I decided to search a little more on the subject of prayer. I searched for the importance and benefit of prayer in life, along with people's experiences on prayer and doubt. I also came back to my previous prayer experiences and tried to trace both faith and doubt in them. A new way of believing gradually took shape in my mind. I kept expanding the borders of my definition for faith, as I referred to something new every time I wrote on the subject. I believed in having doubts and asking questions, but I also believed in persisting and moving on. After a while, I put praying practices in my daily schedule again. In Natural Spirituality, because the language, manner, place and words one chooses in prayer are observed as "secondary consideration" (B. Elahi, 2009, p. 24), I began with informal conversations with God in my head during my daily walks. Some of those prayers were stories I told God, and I sometimes explained to Him about the new things I learned. I usually ended my prayers by asking Him if He was happy with my choices.

One of my later reflections on the experience was almost three years later when I was living in Australia. That was the time I was working on "conjunctive faith" (Robinson, Kendrick & Brown, 2003, p. 125), in which many different ideas had to be held together in balance, with an openness to the perspectives of others. Listening to the audio book of Melville's (1962) *Moby Dick* while driving, I came across a monologue said by Ismael, the narrator, when his new Pagan friend, Queequeg, asked him to worship his wooden God along with him:

> I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolater in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. But what is worship? – to do the will of God – *that* is worship. And what is the will of God? – to do to my fellowman what I would have my fellowman to do to me – *that* is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellowman. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolater. So I kindled the shavings; helped prop up the innocent little idol; offered him burnt biscuit with Queequeg; salaamed before him twice or thrice; kissed his nose; and that done, we undressed and went to bed, at peace with our own consciences and all the world. (Melville, 1962, p. 55)

The extract first reminded me of a saying of Ostad Elahi when he was asked how one seeks divine contentment: "In dealing with others, we should mirror what we would want and reasonably desire for ourselves, while refraining from that which we would dislike for ourselves" (B. Elahi, 2009, p. 24). Then, remembering my experience in Sagrat Cor Church, I asked myself what I would do if I were in Ismael's place. My thought went something like: "I am *a good Muslim*, but if I had a friend like Queequeg, as a follower of Ostad Elahi's philosophy and a practitioner of Natural Spirituality, I would also salaam before the idol twice or thrice and kiss his nose. I would definitely not lose the chance of praying, and I, perhaps, would also go to bed, later, at peace with my conscience and all the world." That night (15 December 2015) in my diary I wrote: "If I can do something to make someone's day while no harm is coming to any other by doing so, I will definitely do it, even if it seems blasphemous to some religious people. This, for me and at the moment, is the meaning of prayer. … I was not wrong to choose to pray in church that day."

My faith was restored or rebuilt in my own way. I kept on praying and have had some beautiful prayer experiences after that event. However, since that day I have not tried to pray in a church yet.

Being Othered. To analyse another aspect of my experience, I look at it culturally and relate parts of my doubt to my new cultural surrounding. I was on the verge of moving to a new country, and as values are varied in different parts of the world (Smith & Long, 2006), I was re-evaluating my beliefs as a part of the coping process. At the same time, I was trying not to go so far that I had to compromise my values in the new culture.

Although I had been previously welcomed warmly in many churches before, in Sagrat Cor Church that day I was being Othered not only because of my nationality, but also by my religion. The priest first divided Catalonia from the rest of the world, but he separated me further when he realized I was not a Christian Catholic. I was clearly put into an out-group by the priest and I felt insecure as I was reminded I did not belong. The question "Am I in the right place to pray?" was to me a subgroup of a larger diasporic question that asked "Am I in the right place to live?"

One of my later reflections on the experience in my diary was a few months after the event, when I was seeing Richard Attenborough's (1982) biographical movie, *Gandhi*. Close to the beginning of the movie, the young Gandhi is thrown off a train for being an Indian sitting in a first-class compartment in spite of having a first-class ticket. I remembered the day in church, along with some of my other experiences of being Othered, and quickly identified with Gandhi. My church experience was surely not as harsh as what Gandhi experienced, as the priest did not tell me to get out of the church, but I guess we shared the same bitter feeling of being Othered.

While Gandhi's life-changing experience affected his life externally, as it led to a non-violent protest campaign, mine was influential mostly inwardly since it modified my way of thinking. The experience was followed by a substantial change that happened to my self-knowledge and gave me a new lens through which I saw things differently. I found new weak spots in my self, mostly related to my interactions with newcomers to my in-group. Trying to empathise with those who had been rejected by a social group, I began to work on becoming more tolerant toward differences.

One of the expectations in every culture is that individuals "remain integrated into groups" (Arrindell, 2003, p. 750). People who immigrate to a different country are expected to fit themselves in. In the process of coping in Barcelona, I tried my best to merge in by learning the language, and participating the traditions and customs, and made an effort to avoid situations where I could be treated as an Other. However, in my church experience, I took a risk, and ironically put myself in a spiritual position whereby being Othered was almost a certainty.

Dignified risk. Why did I decide to do my prayer practice in the church that day? I wanted a more suitable setting for my prayer, counting on the spiritual atmosphere of a location, like a church, that was designated for praying. I now place the decision to do so in the category of my dignified risks. It was a risk because I could guess that I might be treated as an Other. It was dignified because I did it for a good reason.

Sometimes I think because I was practicing resilience living in a new culture, I expected other people to show some flexibility as well. But it was often not the case, especially when I involved myself with things I did not have enough knowledge about. I had some experiences of the sort from when I was in the United States (1996-1997).

Once I went to a church in Chicago (January 1997) for a Sunday service of worship. I loved the celestial church music that separated me from all worldly things for a brief period of time. After the ceremony was over, I followed everyone else in the catholic church and stood in a que to receive "the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ," without actually knowing what would come next. When it was my turn I took the bread in my mouth but I refused to drink the wine. I told the priest that I did not drink alcohol due to my religion. I think I unconsciously expected a friendly and forgiving reaction from the priest that obviously was not realised, as he probably had found my behaviour disrespectful. The look I received from the priest was severe, but apparently I had forgotten the look when I started a conversation about saints with another priest in Spain 15 years later.

Doing a "self-reflective interrogation of personal spiritualty" (Chang, 2011, p.22), I might say that my church experience in Spain was a good example of unwarranted expectation. This sometimes happens when an expectation is groundless and cannot be justified. In going to church to pray that day, I wanted to practice one of Ostad Elahi's sayings in which he explained that one should not miss the chance of praying and join any group of people in prayer even if those people believe in a different religion:

> I was once traveling with some companions in Kermanshah when we came upon a site where some Jews were praying. I walked in and joined them in prayer. At first, they thought I had come to mock them, but when they realized that was not my intent they rejoiced. One should not lose the opportunity to pray simply because others may be of a different faith, be it Jewish, Christian, or otherwise. (B. Elahi, 2009, p. 58)

The difference between what I did and what Ostad Elahi undertook was that Ostad Elahi was a knowledgeable philosopher with comprehensive apprehension of other religions. He did not disrespect people of other faiths, did not challenge their beliefs, and did not ask for an approval for his own contention. While my decision to pray in the church might have been a good one, I still needed to avoid expecting the priest to be resilient toward me because what made me the most upset that day was that my expectation was not met.

Checking on my progress in resiliency in my diaries several months later, I noticed that I was somehow successful in being resilient, both in living in a new culture and in my prayer exercises. Struggling to rebuild my life in the new country, I could accept my shortcomings, modify my behaviour and cope with the new culture. As for prayer exercises, Natural Spirituality greatly helped me to resist the negative thoughts and keep moving forward. My resistance in this case was not toward an outside force. It was a resistance to my imperious self. I was so discouraged after the church experience in Barcelona that I wanted to put an end to all my prayer practices. It seemed so difficult to fight on. But I resisted and, getting some help from the Source, I could overcome the doubt and continued doing my sprayer exercises, albeit in a new form.

Last year, here in Australia, one of my Australian friends was talking to me about the difficulties she had to endure in life. In the middle of her talk she also complained that she did not even have the opportunity to go to a church to pray and feel better, as she did not have a car. Knowing that there were a few churches around her house, I asked why she did not walk to the church that was close to her home. She then simply told me that she did not belong to any of the churches close by, as none of them was a church of her faith.

My friend's experience reminded me of my own story again. The way the incident came to my mind was a "real, affective, involuntary recollection, as opposed to the lifeless results of controlled memory" (Houppermans, 1999, P. 333). It had a strong effect that both saddened me and put some questions in my mind. I did not ask her if she had had a bad experience in a church of another faith before, or whether she had never tried to go to a church of different faith because she Othered them; but I wished there were not so many separating religious and social rules.

I detected some fear in my feelings. I wrote in my diary that night (29 November 2016): "I have not been in a church since I have come to Australia. I am afraid to be rejected. I also do not go to a mosque as I am not wearing hijab as Muslim women do. I am afraid of getting rejected there, too. That is funny … and sad, at the same time." To react to my fear properly, I decided to make use of it to be a better person. And then I considered to take the risk and fight against the concept of blasphemy in my own ideology. I decided to change its meaning for myself: "I think God will not be offended by how people act or speak, even if the speech is apparently sacrilegious, after all what really matters is the intention. I might work on my new definition practically by not being offended when people speak sacrilegiously about God or spirituality." I challenged myself by that practice as I knew that my practice was not approved in many religious contexts. I also knew that in the context of "challenge by choice" one should always consider factors like "fear of failure" and "fear of being laughed at" (Wallia, 2008, p. 40). "I am already different" I thought, "there is no harm in being more different I guess."

Perhaps my experience in church was not a pleasant one, but seeing its impact on my personal development I could say it was worth the risk.

Conclusion

> "I'm learning a lot about myself from writing, too," Says Leigh. "I keep thinking about how to tell the story and how to get the spiritual experience, the feelings, and the ethical dilemmas across to readers. I want to say something that will add to the literature on spirituality, so that I am not writing the story solely for myself, but also for others going through the experience and for researchers who are trying to understand what draws people to spirituality." (Ellis, 2004, p. 33)

The themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk in my analysis referred to discourses surrounding personal identity on the one hand, and cultural discourses on the other. I explored how my identity both affected and was influenced by my interpretation of the event. I also illustrated how these themes were related to the cultural surroundings of my experience. I explained how I drew on some cultural discourses to construct my personal story. In my analysis, the narrative functioned as a cognitive analytical tool and was used as an organisational strategy (Neumann & Nünning, 2008). I organised the analysis while looking at my story as a "discursive practice" (Bernasconi, 2011, p. 22) in a particular social and spiritual context.

Both from revisiting my diaries and by (re)writing my experience and "attempting to explain and justify" (Rapley, 2011, p. 286) my reactions, these three themes were developed. I drew other texts into my analysis to illuminate different aspects of the themes. As an autoethnographer, I also included extensive discussions of my emotions, my thoughts, and my "unstable interpretive decisions" (Chase, 2005, p. 666) in my analysis, to show how the experience affected my personal identity. This way, I not only shared my lived experiences with readers, but also helped myself learn more about different aspects of my self.

In this part of my autoethnography, I articulated aspects of the process where the system of beliefs in my mind altered and my identity was modified. I re-examined the subjective constructs of cultural differences to see if there was a way for me to "reduce the prejudices in othering" (Weiguo, 2013, p. 162), or to lead "spiritual contemplation" towards "social action" (Tacey, 2003, p. 149) against dogmatism. The social actions, in my case, began with myself and the changes that happened first in my ideology and then in my behaviour in the society. By discussing a dignified risk, I investigated some of my probable motivational factors in risk taking. This analysis helped me to pay attention to small details in my practical experiences and inwardly understand some spiritual principles, related to my experience, better. But my reflections over the experience are far from being complete, and as happens to researchers, new questions came to existence in the process of research.

An autoethnography usually "begins with personal writing around an epiphany, mundane aesthetic moment, or intuition that you find interesting or about which you have questions" (Adams et al., p. 70). I began my autoethnography with writing around an epiphany among my prayer experiences, because I wanted to know better its effect on my life and re-evaluating my beliefs. But analysing this experience was just the beginning. In the next two chapters, I continue by examining some of my other exceptional prayer experiences related to the epiphany explained in this chapter. Thus, Chapter 6 is dedicated to the subject of "answered prayers" and the notion of miracle, and Chapter 7 discusses the "unanswered prayers" and the notion of submission to God.

Chapter 6 – Answered Prayers

Following the epiphany analysed in the previous chapter, this chapter analyses four other significant experiences in my spiritual practices of prayer-attention. These experiences, each of them an epiphany by itself, have happened to me in three different countries, and thus are analysed in this chapter in their own cultural context. As these epiphanies have been categorised as "answered prayers" in this research, the chapter begins with a section on the notion of miracle and personal understanding of the elements of a miraculous event. This section, to some extent, is built on the related literature on prayer and mysticism presented in Chapter 3.

The autoethnographic analysis of the narratives in this chapter is partly based on the process of assimilating ethical principles (B. Elahi, 2001) explained in my theoretical framework. For a thematic analysis of the stories, I use the three themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk, introduced in the previous chapter, as analytical tools. Following each story, I write its autoethnographic analysis in which I examine each theme separately. As in the previous chapter, I get help from other research to articulate the cultural understanding of the events, and in my thematic analysis of the narratives, I explain how these themes are related to the elements of a miraculous event. I also elaborate on what new meanings the experiences generated in my system of thought, and how they modified my later behaviour.

In the conclusion, which is the last part of this chapter, I review the main ideas presented in the chapter, explain that not all prayers were answered in my spiritual practices of prayer-attention, and provide a setting for the next chapter which is an analysis of the "unanswered prayers" and the notion of submission to God.

A Miraculous Event

I am a story person. I get the meaning of things through story and my definitions for most of the abstract words come at the end of a story. If one asks me for my definition of kindness, for example, I tell a story and at the end I say I think this is what kindness means.

One of the stories that can define the word "miracle" for me was in Proust's (2002) *The way by Swann's*, originally published in French in 1913. In one of the most famous extracts in the world of literature, the narrator explained the crucial importance of his mother's kiss before going to sleep. Experiencing bedtime as the most fearful part of the day, he found comfort only in his mother's goodnight kisses which he received almost every night despite of the disapproval of his father. The frightful nights were those in which a guest came for a visit and the narrator had to kiss his mother goodnight only once in front of the company instead of having her in his bedroom all for himself and had the chance to kiss her several times.

In one of such nights, the narrator was sent to bed deprived from having even that one kiss, as his father told him to leave his mother alone and go to bed immediately. In his bedroom and feeling desperate, the narrator decided to have a "fit of rebelliousness" (Proust, 2002, p. 31). At the risk of annoying his mother in the presence of the guest, he sent her a letter by the maid, begging her to come upstairs; and when she refused to come, the narrator decided to take his rebelliousness one step further and determined to stay awake until the guest went away. Now that he had taken the risk of angering his parents, he wanted his goodnight kiss whatever the cost, thinking the punishment might be being sent to a boarding school the next day.

Ready to take the consequences of his action, the narrator stayed awake until late and went to the hallway when his parents were at last coming upstairs. While his heart was beating so hard he had trouble walking, his father unexpectedly asked his wife to go along with the boy and even stay with him in his bedroom for the whole night. "I stood there not daring to move" (p. 39) the narrator said, astonished with what had happened. "When I had just committed such a misdeed that I expected to have to leave the house, my parents granted me more than I could ever have won from them as reward for a good deed" (p. 40).

To me, this was a miracle: unlikely, unexpected, astonishing, greater than anything one could even dream for, and the most important, followed by a process of resisting authority or a rebellion, and persistence. In the "answered prayers" that come next, I detect these miraculous characteristics in different cultural contexts.

The Autoethnographic Analysis

According to Munro (2011), in writing personal stories, one is usually engaged with "three states of self" (p. 127): a narrator who remembers and tells the events, a protagonist who experiences, and an author who makes the narrative. I think, in analysing personal stories, one might be engaged with a fourth state of self, a researcher or a scrutiniser, who creatively reflects, examines the actions and intentions, and tries to find meaningful relationships in different contexts. Thus, in the analysis of my stories, I look closely at my experiences to identify references to three themes I discussed in the previous chapter (faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk). I then develop the themes in each story by identifying their properties, and highlight how each theme implies, influences, includes, and gives meaning to other themes.

The Stories – Answered Prayers

Maya Angelou (2008) has a story in which she explains in detail how through a chain of events she survived after she had been abducted and almost beaten to death by her mentally sick boyfriend and imprisoned in his room. At the end of her story she wrote: "My life was saved. Was that event incident, coincident, accident, or answered prayer? I believe my prayers were answered" (Angelou, 2008, p. 34). In my reflections on four stories that come below, I had asked myself the same question over and over; and eventually I had given the same answer, even before I read Angelou's story. Thus, the title "answered prayers" seemed suitable to me for the chosen epiphanies.

In writing personal narratives, one needs to constantly look backwards, "possibly to become conscious in the present of things they did not 'know' then" (Munro, 2011, p. 127). Therefore, in writing my experiences, I use both memory and extracts from my diaries to clarify details and become conscious of the things I did not know then. I need that "consciousness" in the analysis that comes after each story.

1- France: Monday, Five pm!

On 19 August 1996 I went to the American embassy in Paris, France, to apply for an American visa. At that time, I was living with my uncle in Lyon and we were on a two-day trip to Paris. I had applied for an American visa the previous March in Turkey and had been refused. Politically, the relationship between Iran and the United States was at its lowest. There were plenty of anti-American demonstrations in Iran, led by government, and Iran was portrayed negatively in the US media.

As there was no American embassy in Iran (and there is not at the time of writing this thesis), Iranians who wanted to go to the United States had to travel to another country to apply for American visas, and a high percentage were refused. The probability of getting a visa for those who had been refused once became even lower. I had heard that if someone was refused, she had to wait at least six months to be able to apply again and even then it was almost impossible to get a visa. I had been refused only five months before. Everyone who knew I was going that day was sure I would be refused. I went to the embassy with the littlest of hope.

In the embassy, when it was my turn, the man behind the window looked at my passport and said: "You applied for an American visa five months ago and your application was denied. Why?" I explained that I did not have a document to show that my husband was still in Iran. He asked: "And do you have such a document now?" I showed my husband's military service card and explained that in Iran men who are doing their military service could not get a passport or leave the country. Because I thought my case would be refused regardless, I had not even translated the card into English. He took the card, made a photocopy of it, gave it back to me along with my passport and said: "If your application is approved, we will give you a call. If you do not hear from us in a week, it means your application has been refused again." The interview was over. I then handed him my uncle's business card and explained that I was living with my uncle in Lyon and asked him to call my uncle's office if he ever wanted to call. The man looked at the card, read aloud "Acupuncture" and smiled. I said goodbye and left.

My uncle and I decided to tour Paris in the evening. While we were having coffee in one of the beautiful cafés near Seine River, I started to talk to God in my head. There was an inexplicable feeling in my heart. I started with "They say things will happen if You just want them to happen, no matter how impossible they seem they are. I know that You are not there to grant wishes, but can You please help me this time? Please *make* them give me this visa!" My eyes filled with tears. Seeing me, my uncle suggested I forget about the visa application, think of the moment, and enjoy being in one of the most magnificent cities in the whole world. When we were leaving the café, I was looking at my watch. It was five minutes past five.

The day after, back in Lyon, I went with my uncle to his office in the morning. He began his work with listening to the voice messages on his phone. After the second or third message, the answering machine said: "Monday, five pm …" That was the message from the American embassy to say that I was granted the visa and could go to the embassy with my passport any day to get it …

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Faith / doubt. This experience was, for me, a journey toward faith. It happened only a few months after I had started following Natural Spirituality. At that stage, prayer for me was the means by which I engaged with God, and through that engagement the existence of God was manifested to me. I occasionally selected prayer practices just as a duty to perform, and my prayers were formed as short intimate conversations in which I kept asking questions and used my imagination to decode spiritual signs and guess God's answers. That day in Paris, it was the first time I asked God to grant me a wish since I started to engage with Natural Spirituality.

In Islamic mysticism, asking for God's help is a celebrated theme. A spiritual seeker needs to constantly "seek aid of Him, not of another than Him" (Rumi, 1979, p. 188) with patience and with prayer to be able to overcome hardships. Needless to say, spiritual travellers in higher stages of mysticism seek God's help only for fighting their imperious self. However, as I explained in Chapter 2, at the elementary stages even a petitionary prayer might be beneficial for the soul as it can strengthen one's relationship with the Source. That day, I was focusing on God's power and the fact that "what He wants will happen" (Anvar, 2012, p. 125). I had in mind the power of prayer in changing events, and I asked for His help with a "sense of excitement" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 161). However, I did not really expect to receive the help: "Why would God want this to happen? He must be busy with more important things and more serious problems." But it happened.

I was very surprised when I heard the voice message. Getting the visa was not as important as the timing for me. The fact that they called me from the embassy at exactly five o'clock in the evening, the very time I was talking to God, made me think that what happened was beyond an accident. To use a spiritual jargon, I may dare to say I was "perplexed."

In Islamic mysticism, perplexity is a very high spiritual stage. Among the seven stages through which a mystic reaches the Truth, perplexity is the one before the last (B. Elahi, 2007; Rafi, 2016). This is the stage in which the mystic, having experienced union with the divine (the fifth stage), is sent back to "the phenomenal world of multiplicity" (Stone, 2006, p. 98). The shock of such experience is so great that "all previously 'known' logical distinctions and categories are thrown into chaos and absolute confusion swells within the wayfarer" (Stone, 2006, p. 99). Far from being in that stage in spirituality, after hearing the voice message I felt that I left this world for a few seconds, was in the presence of God, and was back to the world again. I was shocked and could not think. It was something beyond being happy. The experience held my attention because it was beyond my expectation and I had trouble understanding or explaining it (Adams, et al., 2015).

I found many experiences in spirituality literature that seemed close to mine. People who believed they had been assisted by God in a difficult situation after calling for help, people who unexpectedly felt that they were filled with God's love, and people who thought an apparently insignificant experience deeply affected their soul and changed their lives. Costello (2016), for example, in his book on faith, explained how once he suddenly and without premeditation felt God's presence while he was walking in nature. He explains:

> I was overwhelmed with a sense that I was in the presence of God and, even more astonishingly, that this God loved me. Experiences like this in many ways are essentially wordless experiences. I heard no voice and saw no light but I was lost in awe and saturated with love. Awe because this seemed something far greater than my mind could conceive or fathom. (p. 162)

Many aspects of Costello's (2016) feeling in the above extract were similar to mine. I, too, felt God's love and was astonished by that feeling. There was no supernatural thing in my experience either: no light, no voice, no vision; but I similarly felt that what happened to me was something far greater than my mind could understand.

Another similar experience belonged to DeBell (2009). He explained that once he was in Rio, he developed a thought while he was reading Jung's essay. The thought told him to go to the Botanical Garden where a tree would open the door to the spiritual dimension. Following the thought, he went to the Botanical Garden. After an hour or so during which nothing happened, he sat on a bench "across from a scrawny tree with a long Latin name" (p. 9) and thought he was fooled again by his desire to have a little magic in his life. But at that moment, a red leaf floated down from atop the tree and planted itself in his loosely closed right hand:

> I was astonished. I had read that such things happened, but this was different. Something mystical *had* actually happened, and to *me*. But *what* happened? The experience was too concrete for me to dismiss it, but too vague for me to have any idea what to do to understand it better. (DeBell, 2009, p. 10)

DeBell's (2009) explanation of the event could almost be mine: the sense of astonishment and being mystified at the same time. In my later reflections, as recorded in my diaries, I regarded the event as a practical experience of Ostad Elahi's (B. Elahi, 2001) theory that said "He is everywhere and with everyone. All we have to do is sincerely invoke Him and learn how to understand His signs" (p. 47). I marked this incident as "the sign of His presence." From what I wrote in my dairy late August 1996, I experienced an inexplicable feeling of "being heard" that transformed my faith.

Being Othered. In this experience I was being Othered as an Iranian in the American embassy. I could see the hierarchy of power in which I stood at the very bottom and the man behind the window stood at the top. He could determine my fate by deciding if I was allowed to go to the United States or should stay in Iran for the coming future. I thought he had the absolute right to say no: it was their country after all and they had the right to choose people who wanted to go there. My fear and shame did not originate from the behaviour of the embassy's personnel. The man behind the window was polite. Nothing in his manners or speech was offensive. My feelings were internal. Being an Iranian, I felt I had a dark mark on my forehead and I was ashamed of who I was because of my nationality. I felt subordinate and powerless, humbly standing by the window answering the questions.

Power relationships, according to Ye (2011), can fall into two broad categories of hard ones and soft ones. Hard power relationships are those in which some agents overcome the resistance of others and get them to do something that they otherwise would not do. Soft power relationships, however, emphasises cooperation, integration, and "collaborative endeavours" (p. 12). I regarded the power relation in the embassy closer to a soft one, because the timid behaviour I chose to have was an internal choice. My feelings were based on cultural education (Poprawski, 2015) I had received throughout my life.

I tried to fight "the epistemological privileging of the West" (Pourmokhtari, 2013, p. 1768) that had been strongly shaped in my mind through culture: the conceptualisation that made us (Iranians) look up to Western people as modern, knowledgeable, civilised and generally "better" people. But it was not easy. It was not easy to set aside cultural beliefs; and although I reminded myself that the pre-assumptions that separate people into *us* and *them* were only based on biases and prejudices (Furman, Epps, & Lamphear, 2016), I still needed an effort to get over it.

Things that happened on my arrival to the United States emphasized my Otherness. Right after I was in the country, in the airport, I was asked to fill a form with my personal information. Answering one of the questions, I reached one that was related to my race. There were multiple choices and I had to select one. The first choice was "White" and I ticked the box beside it without even reading the rest of the choices. I strongly thought that I was White, considering the colour of my skin. Reviewing the form, the immigration officer in the airport sarcastically asked me if I was American or European (he had my passport and he knew I was Iranian). When I said No he gave the form back to me: "Only Americans and Europeans are White." I looked at other choices and ticked Asian – I was thinking of the continent Iran was located in – but the officer gave the form back to me again: "You are not Asian" he said, "Asian people have eyes like this" and he put his fingers next to his eyes and stretched his skin to resemble people who lived in East Asia. I was confused; I could not find what I was. When I asked him, the officer told me to tick "Other" and write in the empty space next to it "Middle Eastern." Filling out the form in the airport limited me "to a series of bubbles that [were] somehow supposed to classify or identify me" (Rivera Maulucci & Mensah, 2015, p. 1). The message sent to me was "Know your place! You do not belong!" To this day, I have not passed the stupefaction of the "fact" that I was not white.

Dignified risk. Deciding to move to the United States was one of my young adulthood dignified risks. Perhaps it was not a big risk compared to the risks I took later in life, as I was only 24 years old, I did not have a permanent job, and a new beginning did not mean to lose much. But I had a relatively easy life living in the capital city of Iran with the best facilities in the country, and enjoyed the financial and emotional support of my family.

The risk was to leave that relatively comfortable situation and move toward the unknown. My husband and I had a project of moving to a country with more opportunities to get jobs, apply for permanent residency, and build a better life for ourselves; and we used all our savings for the project. As we had just begun our life together, even plane tickets or the visa application fees were too much for us.

I could guess that life in a foreign country would have some difficulties, but the difficulty went beyond my expectation. Getting the visa was the beginning of a series of hardships that happened to me in the following year and made me frequently ask myself "Was it worth it?" I had to work long hours in a gas station and a fast food restaurant, undertaking cooking and cleaning and tiresome works. I had difficulties understanding customers and felt embarrassed. I missed the intellectual talks I had with my close friends about books and movies back in Iran. In the United States, people around me were mostly concerned about having more money and buying expensive things. I was homesick, away from many people that I deeply loved including my piano teacher who was also my mentor. I missed my lessons with him and thought every day away from him was lost. For months, I did not even have a piano and had to go to a college 40 kilometres away to practice, and this happened only on weekends.

I was not a refugee in the United States, but what I experienced there and then can be connected to refugee experiences in the host countries (Hyder, 2005). I experienced some negative social reactions to my presence in the United States due to being an Iranian. I dropped in my standard of living in the new country, as I had to share a house and work as a general worker. I experienced isolation as I had lost the support network of my extended family and friends. And all these experiences contributed to my psychological vulnerability.

Did I do the right thing to take that risk? The easy answer might be "No" because I stayed in the United States for only 14 months, and then came back to Iran. Our plans failed when my husband could not get an American visa and I was too worn out to wait longer. However, I do not see the experience as a complete loss. I learned many things about life, living alone in the United States. My English improved and I passed the TOEFL test with a good score, something that helped me with my later studies and work in Iran (see the first story in Chapter 7). I had also the chance to attend one of Professor Bahram Elahi's conferences in University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and a question and answer session in which I learned many new things about spirituality as an experimental science.

Going to the Unites States also gave me the opportunity to practice my ethical practices in a new cultural environment and in contact with new people. At that time, I was working on a booklet of practices on "decent behaviour in the society" (see p. 97). The exercises in that booklet concentrated on the right of others, being beneficial in the society, paying attention to and compliment on the strong points in others, and being influential by acting based on integrity. One new difficulty in my practices was that I needed to react properly on the biases and prejudices I was confronted with, and working on knowing and fighting with my own biases and prejudices. Turning back on my experiences in my later diary entries I referred to that period of my life as an educational period.

The risk I took also brought a new question in my mind that challenged my then shaped epistemology. Almost at the end of my stay in the United Sates, as "an audience" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 30) to my experience, a strange idea came to my mind. Can God make us wish for something? Is it possible that one is destined first, and then the idea comes to her head and she wishes for it? Was it me who wanted to go to the United States or was I wanted there? Maybe God wanted me there and made me wish for it.

If I was the object at the moment of wishing (instead of the subject who initially wished), I became the subject at the moment the question came to my mind (Kenofer, 2013; Kegan & Souvaine, 1998). I was the artefact who began to observe, or the object that became the beholder. This obscure philosophical idea, along with its questions, attracted my attention to the concept of fate for years and I searched in as many books as I could find to see if it had been discussed anywhere; and although I found some curious arguments on "object" and "subject" in postmodern writings and some discussions on peculiarity of the subject of fate in mystical books, the question was never cleared in my head.

Some researchers maintain that decision difficulty can motivate people to believe in fate to reduce the psychological burden of not knowing what to do (Tang, Shepherd, & Kay, 2014). But, I was mostly curious to know how the spiritual world actually worked. There is a saying in Holy Quran that says people carry their fate around their neck (17:13), and I interpreted the sentence as a sort of determinism. Ostad Elahi's (B. Elahi, 2005) discussions on determinism and free will – explained as "the principle of the middle way" in Chapter 1 under the title of Contentions – provided practical information on how people are partly responsible for what happens to them. However, the books that are written on Ostad Elahi's philosophy did not contain the answer for my detailed questions; and the philosophical idea of the conscious object has remained a question in my mind ever since.

Risks sometimes end with a loss, and sometimes end with a win. Sometimes risks change meaning and direction through time. I did not become a permanent resident in the United States. I came back to Iran with a tumour as big as a melon in my womb. Doctors told me it was because I was under pressure for a long period of time. But I came back with a broader mind and bigger questions. The risk, thus, was worth it.

2- Iran: The Golden Star

When I gave birth to my first and only child, I was affected by a strange form of postnatal anxiety: I could not be separated from my daughter even for a moment. Most nights I slept on a couch holding her in my arms while she was sleeping. I stopped working and going to classes, swimming pools, movies, and any other places that I could not take my daughter with me. I remember once my mum came to our house and offered help: "Give me the baby" she said, "I will play with her while you are making dinner." I told my mum that if she really wanted to help, she could go and make the dinner as I preferred to play with my baby myself. People looked at me as if I was crazy and I saw the pity in their faces. Indeed, I felt anxious most of the time.

Every September, for the occasion of Ostad Elahi's birthday, there was a ceremony that I loved to attend. I enjoyed every moment of the discussions, the meditation, and the celestial music. Although it was upsetting to miss the ceremony, being separated from my daughter was so painful for me that I decided not to go there the first September after my daughter was born. The next year, though, when I was invited for the ceremony, I so much wanted to go that I shyly asked the woman who was inviting me if I could bring my one-year-old child with me. I explained that I would make sure she would not disturb the celebration. But the woman told me that it was not possible and added in a very friendly manner: "Come on, Haleh! Just leave the child with your husband for two hours and come. Nothing bad will happen. It is a long time we have not seen you. You are really missed. I am sure you will have a good time."

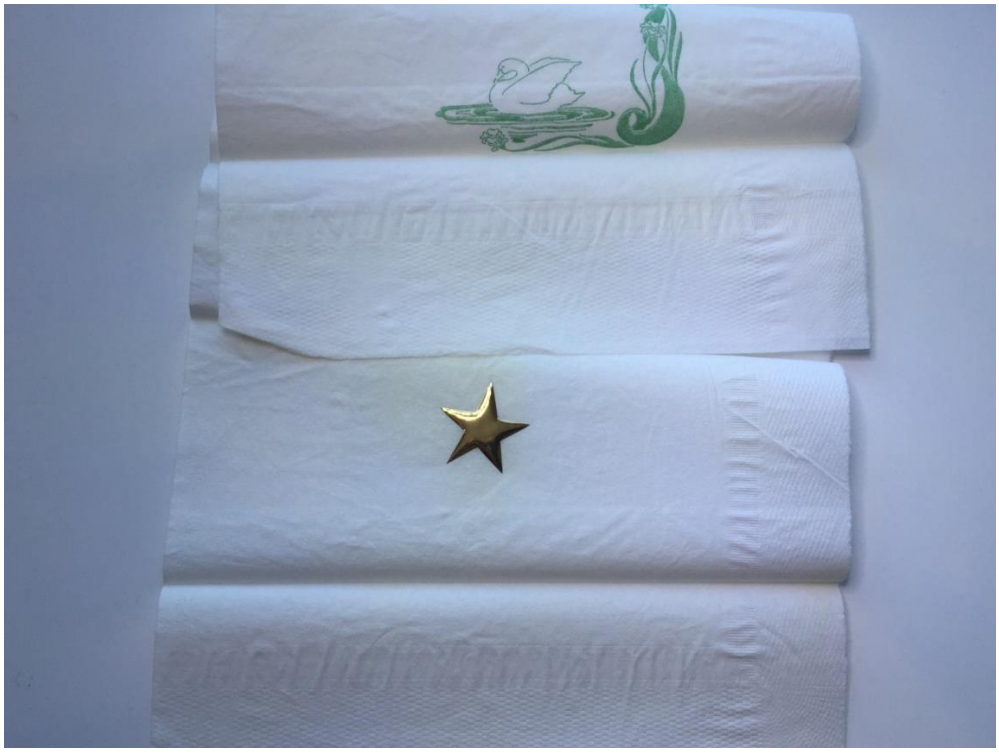
What people then could not understand was how difficult it was for me to be separated from my daughter. I guess that was because they were not familiar with my situation and had never experienced the same anxiety. My husband who knew how much I wanted to go to the celebration offered help. He suggested: "Just leave her and go. If you saw it was beyond your tolerance, come back before the ceremony is over." That seemed a practical idea to me; therefore, on the appointed day I left the house without my daughter for the first time.

On 11 September 1999, in Tehran, I went to the ceremony for Ostad Elahi's birthday, while my heart remained at home. From the first part of the ceremony I cannot remember much. I was counting the minutes for the discussions to be over to be able to use my host's phone to call home (we did not have cell phones then). When I called, after sitting there for an hour, my husband told me that my daughter was sitting next to him on the sofa watching *Pocahontas*, my daughter's then favourite cartoon, and that she seemed quite happy. To make a joke, my husband told me that she was excited experiencing sitting on the sofa instead of sitting on my lap!

After the telephone call, I joined the other guests who were going upstairs for dinner. That year in the ceremony, the host had put a golden star in the middle of one of the napkins. She announced that the person who got that napkin would cut the birthday cake (symbolically be chosen as the special guest). Everybody was talking about the golden star while standing in the que waiting for their turn to help themselves with the food. I could not really join the conversations. I felt an empty spot in my heart that hurt and made breathing difficult. I was also dizzy and felt that my knees were shaking.

Waiting in the queue, I began a conversation with Ostad Elahi in my mind: "I do not know what wrong is with me. I suffer and I make things difficult for my family as well. No one understands what I am going through. People think I am out of my mind. Perhaps I *am* out of my mind. I know I should change, but I am not strong enough to get over it all by myself. I need your help in this. Would You help me, please?!" I had tears in my eyes when I got my plate. Not feeling hungry, I just went to the windows and looked at the beautiful city at night. I took the napkin on the plate to wipe my tears off, and then I saw it. The golden star was there …

In less than a month I began leaving home alone (without my child), first for short periods of time, and later for longer ones. I began to go to my classes and I started to work again.



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Faith / doubt. At the time of this event, I had been engaged with Natural Spirituality for four years, and my prayer practices were different from the time of the first story. I mostly tried to concentrate on "establishing a linkage" (Dillon, 2016, p. 11) between the Source and me in my prayers. That day in the ceremony, I asked for His help to overcome a kind of psychological disorder. I did not think of my request as a petitionary prayer. I knew that the unusual anxiety prevented me from progressing not only in my social life but also in my spiritual life. I wanted to change, to be able to control my emotions, and to become a better person both socially and spiritually. I had talked to counsellors and tried some psychological techniques like self-suggestion and "pretending it does not exist" to no avail. To free myself from the disorder, I needed help; and I believed that only He could help me.

Finding the golden star that night was as perplexing as hearing the voice message in France, explained in the first story. I gasped when I saw it. Then, only after a moment, all my anxiety and pain disappeared and I was showered with peace and happiness. Still looking outside from the window I told Him: "You understood! You understood how difficult it was for me to come here today. … You understood me when no one could." And then an inexplicable love toward Ostad Elahi appeared in my heart. As I recorded in my diary (12 September 1999), I had fallen in love with someone with whom I had already been in love. Last year, I recalled that moment when I was studying Greek mythology. In a picture book about Aphrodite, O'Connor (2014) explained how the Goddess of Love eventually received her physical form: "the power or Eros had existed before, since the time before time. But now, for the first time it had a consciousness, an avatar" (p. 14). Similarly, the love of God had been in my heart for a long time, but after this event it became palpable for me. I became conscious of my love, and the consciousness brought me a new meaning for faith.

What happened after that event was not a sudden change in my behaviour. I felt calmer, but I came back home with the same feeling of dependency to my daughter. Transformation came only gradually, almost unnoticeably. The change began with being aware of a sort of spiritual energy by the help of which I could act differently in familiar situations. Every time I wanted to do something brave – that is, to go out without my daughter – I asked for His help and the help was simply there. Several times I wrote in my diary that "I am progressing with His help." I was practicing to properly combine the spiritual state of reliance on God with the notion of self-reliance which is based on organised personal effort (Bin Ramli, 2015). I relied on His help with full trust and confidence, and the reliance gradually became a part of my faith and a habit in my life. The new faith motivated me to study and go back to university (see the first story in Chapter 7). It also encouraged me to work harder for my self-development. As I had more regular prayer practices and I performed my prayers with better "presence of heart" (B. Elahi, 1995, p. 242), I was more mindful of my behaviour, and I was more prepared to fulfil God's prescriptions and fight my imperious self.

Being Othered. As Ellis (2004) explains, "Personal narratives occur in cultural contexts" (p. 208). In this experience I was Othered because I deviated from the norms of Iranian culture in terms of mothering. My behaviour was not approved culturally and people around me wanted me to come back to my senses as quickly as possible. If the behavioural symptoms persisted, I could easily be considered permanently abnormal, deranged or insane. What made the situation really difficult was that I was getting out of the cycle of culturally normal people and I was losing friends.

If culture refers to "a set of norms, behaviours and ways to make sense of the world" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5), people who consciously or unconsciously defy those set of norms and behaviours are regarded as people with aberrant behaviour. My dependence to my daughter was so exaggerated that it could not be categorized as a defined motherly love. Once my cousin told me "We (mothers) all love our children. Are you trying to prove that your love toward your child is greater than ours?" The answer was No! I did not try to prove anything. I had no explanation for my behaviour. My reactions were unnamed and uncommon in our culture; they were considered as anomalous and I was set aside.

In her research on how women experience their bodies and their identities as mothers, Malatzky (2017) discusses how Australian women "reconcile, negotiate and resist competing discourses of good motherhood" (p. 25). Malatzky (2017), influenced by Foucault, argues that power is both constituting and being constituted through the actions of individuals, and the discourses in operation around individuals affect how they experience the world. She further explains that because of the nature of power, resistance is always possible; however, being critical to and resisting popular discourses is not an easy task. Malatzky (2017) suggests that while women cannot step outside of dominant discourses, they can be conscious of the ways these discourses position them, can critique these discourses, and eventually can create alternative discourses. My responses to the being Othered in this story had a form of resistance similar to Malatzky's (2017) argument. While some participants in Malatzky's (2017) research resisted hegemonic models of motherhood with the focus on maternal bodies, my resistance was focused on maternal mind and feelings – that is, the mind and feelings of a woman after becoming a mother. I could not step outside the dominant discourse, but I tried to be conscious of how it positioned me.

I knew that my behaviour was beyond my control: I did not want to hurt people or to be away from them. I loved my immediate family, my extended family and my friends, and I enjoyed their company. But, because of the anxiety, I wanted to be with my daughter at all times and people who were around sometimes were offended because of the amount of attention I gave to her; and then I felt guilty. Being conscious of the discourse helped me accept myself as a different mother, and I began to critique those who had a firm definition for everything. I tried to free myself "from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture" (Duncombe, 2002, p. 5) and I even felt a little happy that I could experiment with new ways of seeing and being.

Resistance both excited me and educated me. It was making me a stronger and kinder person at the same time. But it was also depressing and wearisome. I missed my active life outside home: going to movies, swimming pools, classes, and being a teacher. Although I tried to enjoy my resistance, I never stopped searching for a way to overcome the anxiety. Finding the golden star in my napkin provided me with psychological tools to fight my uneasiness and my "abnormal" habits. I changed, but I did not consider myself as defeated by the power of culture. I changed because I wanted to improve; and to create an alternative discourse, I decided to begin with reshaping my own thoughts. I decided to sympathise more with people who had different life habits. I decided not to criticise people, but to interrogate and criticise inflexible definitions and biased cultural norms. I aimed to develop the attribute of "sympathetic awareness" within me and become as understanding as God when He sent me the golden star. After all, based on the process of assimilating ethical principles (B. Elahi, 2001) explained in Chapter 2, the ultimate aim of practicing ethics was to develop divine attributes.

Dignified risk. Going to the ceremony that day was a risk because it was an intentional attempt to step out of my comfort zone. I was afraid to go because I knew leaving my daughter would position me in a state of acute pain, and there was no assurance that it helped with my emotional problem. I call it a dignified risk because I did it for a good purpose. I wanted to try that to see what would exactly happen to me. I needed to experiment to know some hidden aspects of my self. In my diary, I compared myself to a student who travelled to another city to take a course, knowing that she would have a difficult time there. "Growth needs sacrifice," I wrote on 9 September 1999, "One does not learn much in comfortable situations." However, there was no guarantee that I could learn anything due to my disturbed mind.

The most difficult part of my action that day was to hide my emotions; so my dignified risk needed to be accompanied by a dignified silence. The pain I felt, when I left my daughter, was considered so irrational by others that I could not expect any sort of sympathy or support. In order not to become an object of ridicule, I decided to tolerate the pain silently and made an attempt to look normal in the gathering. To remove the signs of anxiety from my face, I breathed deeply with long inhales. To erase the lumps in my throat, I repeatedly swallowed my saliva. And to stop tears I avoided talking as much as I could.

The dignified silence caused me a great deal of suffering that night, but the risk was worth it. In a "self-reflective interrogation of personal spiritualty" (Chang, 2011, p.22), I came to the idea that getting the golden star acted as a catalyst that accelerated the process of overcoming my emotional disorder. Long before I went to the ceremony that night I had decided to change and I had set several spiritual exercises to help me succeed. I think the exercises had their effects, but they waited for the catalyst to function.

The exercises I had practiced before finding the golden star were mostly on education of thought (B. Elahi, 2001) along with practices of prayer-attention. I worked on "informed positivism" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 81) or "positive-seeing" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 118) trying to lift my spirits by being content with my present state, finding some positive points in my situation, and having hope in the future. In my prayer practices, I tried to improve my concentration (B. Elahi, 2001) by directing my thought to a specific target. I thought that way I could be more focused and receive more metacausal energy to heal myself. I was also trying to pass the anxiety phase by systematically using my willpower with the intention of moving forward. For example, I started to study again for the university's entrance exam. I considered my studies as a long-term plan to reduce my dependency to my daughter by focusing on other aspects of life and concentrating on some personal affairs.

The golden star, as a rewarding educational object, completed my efforts. Researchers maintain that objects have contextualised meanings in educational environments (Nichols & Snowden, 2015) and are part of daily encounters in ethical educational practice (Bone, 2018). For example, educators can use specific objects to remind their students to do or not to do certain things, to clarify an explanation, to facilitate an experiment, or to reward their students. God – my Educator (B. Elahi, 2005) – used the golden star to reward me. When I found it, I made sure that my teacher – my master – noticed me and was happy with my hard work. It was a sign for me to know that my actions were in conformity with His satisfaction; and it provided me with enough energy and motivation to keep up the good work. After all my industrious daily efforts to change, I took one big step by being brave and taking the risk. Then God rewarded me by sending the catalyst and carried me a thousand steps onward.

3- Iran: Happy with What I Have

My daughter was a toddler but she did not talk, at least not in a known language. She had her own language which I, and only I, understood and responded to. My family and friends kept asking me why she was not talking, and gave me tips to encourage her to talk. When she was four years old and still refused to talk, people around me began to seriously show their concern. Even her kindergarten teacher told me that it was not normal, and thus alarming, that my four-year-old daughter did not communicate and respond to her commands in class, and asked me to take her to a specialist.

I took my daughter to a speech therapist, unwillingly. The very first day the specialist, after asking me only a few questions, diagnosed that my daughter suffered from an illness called autism. He told me that there was no cure for that, but she would do better if I took her to some of his treatment sessions. Those sessions were very expensive for us, but everyone knows how far parents go for their children. I had to take her there two or three times a week.

Going to the therapist was one the most difficult thing I have done in my life. It was a very hot summer that year. I did not have a car and we went to treatment sessions using public transportation which was uncomfortable and very time consuming. My daughter did not like going there because the therapist was unkind and strict. If he asked her to colour something with blue and she took the green pencil, he punished her by scowling at her and shouting "Blue!! Blue!!" I sometimes thought that she understood the therapist but intentionally defied him, just because she did not like him.

The last session I took my daughter there (25 August 2002), it was so hot I could not easily breathe. My daughter burned her arm on the bus when it touched the window frame. That was the day the specialist decided to force my daughter to talk in the treatment session. After several attempts, by which he managed to make my daughter completely frustrated, he told her she could not get out of the room to see me unless she said "I want to go to my mum!" She only cried. I was listening to her crying for about ten minutes when I decided that we had enough. I went in to the room, hugged my daughter tight in my arms and told her she did not have to come back there ever. We left.

I came back home exhausted, downhearted, and confused. My daughter's speaking problem had not solved and I did not know what to do next. I was not sure if leaving the therapy was the right thing to do. I sat down on my bed, took a framed picture of Ostad Elahi, pressed it on my chest and began to cry. In my conversation with him I told him that I was completely happy with what I had, that I was crying not because I wanted something, but only because I was tired. I asked him to give me strength to tolerate people's looks and talk, and help me be a good mother for my sweet daughter. My face was completely wet with tears when I took the picture a little away from my body to look at Ostad's face. I could not believe what I saw: there were tears on his face in the picture. He was crying along with me …

The next day, on 26 August 2002, my daughter said her first words in Persian. In fact, she made a complete sentence.

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Faith / doubt. At the time of the above experience, faith had become a crucial part of my life, not always in my conscious thought, but "underlying, almost like breathing" (Ammatullah, 2006, p. 228). By this stage of my spiritual path, I had also developed a more intimate relationship with Ostad Elahi and was devoted to him as my mentor. Of course Ostad Elahi had passed away many years before, but through reading his sayings and his books I could imagine him alive, being next to me, talking to me and listening to me in my prayers. I imagined him as a wise, kind, understanding and protective father, perhaps because Ostad Elahi regarded his spiritual students as his children (B. Elahi, 1995; 2007).

Here I want to remind readers that in paths of mysticism it is a common tradition that disciples relate to their spiritual masters with utmost respect, absolute trust and deep spiritual love (Halman, 2000). Almost all Sufis, in the history of Sufism, had a mentor to whom they were devoted. The most famous examples are the spiritual love between Rumi and his spiritual mentor, Shams. Praying to Ostad Elahi meant – for me – having a face in mind while talking to God. Using my imagination and seeing him close to me, I could do my prayers with more concentration and more fervour.

In this particular experience, my motivation for praying was higher than usual because I was in a situation of "need or distress" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 161). I needed a kind of help that I could not get from anyone around me. So I relied on God, and only God (Rumi, 1979), to help me. At that time, I was practicing prayer as "a type of thanksgiving to God" (Luz, 2016, p. 52). In Ostad Elahi's philosophy, the real state of thanksgiving is through both saying thanks and truly feeling thankful (N. Elahi, 1994). I tried to feel truly happy with all my blessings and live a productive life with whatever I had. Feeling truly happy meant I had to avoid pretending. I needed to either ignore things that disturbed me or think of them as a means for learning life lessons.

The day we came back from the speech therapy, I was frustrated. I did not know what the right thing was to do. My willpower had disintegrated and I did not want to continue the therapy for my daughter. However, I was uncertain if that was a good choice. Ethically, I asked myself if I was going to neglect my responsibility toward my child (B. Elahi, 2005). There was no one among my friends or family members that I could comfortably talk to about my situation, but I wanted to talk about it to someone. I decided to talk about it to Ostad who was wise and understanding. He understood. He always understood. He knew what my daughter and I had been through and I had a feeling that He would tell me what to do in a sort of inspiration.

My prayer had a paradoxical feature that day, as I was crying out of pain and giving thanks to Him at the same time. I told Him that I was happy with everything I had and I said it sincerely. I liked the innovative way of my daughter's communication and admired her way of resistance to outside forces. I was curiously proud of her because she, in her own way, fought the standard norms of society in her kindergarten and bravely endured "the pain of being denied respect" (Ali, 2014, p. 119). She was the source of joy and inspiration to me at home. Her independence to outside approval impressed me. Nevertheless, I *was* worried about her future and I *was* tired of not knowing what to do. In my prayer that day, I did not ask for a cure. When I embraced Ostad Elahi's picture, I literally felt a warmth as if I was in between his fatherly arms. I remember that my heart was full of his love. When I saw Ostad's face full of tears at the end of my prayer, I felt so close to him that I was ready to accept anything in my life. I was warm-hearted, knew I was protected, and felt brave. At the beginning of my prayer, I was still unsure if I could really stop taking my daughter to the therapy. I thought I might have over reacted. At the end of my prayer, however, I was certain the therapy was not a good option.

Our life (my daughter's and mine as her mother) began to change from the next day when my daughter suddenly told a repairman, who annoyed her by his questions, to "Keep quiet and fix the television" in pure Persian. As time passed she spoke more and more words and sentences, and after some time she could speak almost as well as any other child her age. The change in my daughter's speech, though, was so gradual that I did not relate it to the prayer immediately. My daughter said that sentence one day and went back to her own language. The new words and sentences came dispersedly, one this week, the other the week after. Thus, it took me a few years to connect the changes to the prayer that day.

Reading my diaries, I categorised my reflections over this experience into three phases. In the first phase, I was angry with the therapist. In the second phase, I thought about the probability of misdiagnosing. It was only in the third phase that I could see "the miracle."

First phase: a few months after stopping the therapy, when my daughter could say short sentences, I began to write in my diary how I felt angry with the therapist "who lied to me just to make some money." I thought my daughter had never had a problem, and she simply did not *want* to talk in a normal language.

Second phase: months later, when my anger toward the therapist was reduced to a great extent and I was practicing the ethical principle of "not judging," I began to look at the situation differently. Reviewing all the therapy sessions in my mind, once I wrote in my diary: "Maybe I judged too quickly. Perhaps the therapist was not lying. He might have been inexperienced and diagnosed wrongly. After all [my daughter] had some of the symptoms." I felt I needed to be more understanding toward people, accept my own lack of knowledge, stop judging, and be more forgiving.

Third phase: it was a few years later, in 2004, that I related the prayer to the change that happened in my daughter's communicative behaviour. The realisation came about in an instant. To use DeBell's (2009) words, when he also experienced a spiritual realisation, it appeared "more like a fact" (p. 322). I had just received a new book written by B. Elahi (2005) (the Persian translation from French was out in 2004) and was reading it eagerly. There was a part on "divine presence" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 21) that made me stop and think if I had ever experienced it in my life, and immediately I was reminded of the prayer experience. The extract was:

> Whoever sees a manifestation of the Source or feels His presence cannot resist His captivating love; … His manifestation is a radiance of ineffable power that is at the same time very delicate, delightful, and deeply reassuring such that it completely encompasses us. (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 22)

Yes, I had experienced it: the reassuring power that encompassed me. And then something in mind illuminated. I wrote in my diary: "Maybe the therapist was not wrong either. May be … there was something wrong … and then it changed. … Maybe it was a miracle" (11 November 2004).

Although the feeling I had that day was momentary, I am able to recollect it whenever I want. God intervened in the course of my life and His intervention was life-saving. The realisation deepened my devotion toward God and strengthened my faith. I firmly believed that I would never be alone in hardships. The new form of faith that was cultivated in me that day still remains. Even now, at moments of distress, I recall that experience to remind myself that I am protected.

Being Othered. In this experience, my daughter was Othered as a child who spoke in an unknown language and I was Othered as a mother who responded to that language. But what I want to discuss specifically in this section is the case in which my daughter and I were Othered as patients in the context of health care services.

From my observations, in Iran the relation of a patient and a doctor is based on "medical paternalism" (Donetto, 2010, p. 188), a hierarchical relationship in which the doctor orders and the patient obeys (I am not sure if this is always true in first world countries). Since usually the number of patients waiting to see the doctor is huge, many doctors try to be quick in their examinations. The moment doctors diagnose, they prescribe authoritatively and expect patients to obey without asking questions. Explanation is considered a waste of time. Perhaps because the emotional burden associated with care for the sick is too high, some physicians also "adopt distancing behaviours that leave patients feeling isolated and alienated" (Astrow, 2015, p. 418). When Othering is defined as "the process by which one group reproduces and reinforces distinctions, dominance and subordination against those without power" (Williams & Korn, 2017, p. 22), this isolated and alienated feeling patients experience can be translated as being Othered.

When my daughter was diagnosed with autism, I wanted to know why or how it happened. The doctor asked me if my child was born by caesarean section and then answered my question with a short firm sentence: "Children who are born by C-section are at a high risk for this illness." In Iran, giving birth by caesarean section has become a fashion and most women who can afford the price prefer it to vaginal delivery. It seemed to me that the doctor did not approve of giving birth by caesarean section and was blaming me for my daughter's illness.

I wanted to defend myself and say that my case was an emergency C-section and it was not performed upon request. But seeing that the doctor did not have time for the explanation, I asked again if there was anything I could do in upbringing my child to avoid this problem. The doctor told me "You could at least not respond to her weird language." I was blamed again for responding to my daughter and encouraging her to resist. I was the bad mother who made the irreparable damage to her own child.

Exploring contemporary forms of mother-blaming, Courcy & des Riviéres (2017) researched on mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder. They explained in their research that in the past the behaviour and personalities of mothers were considered as potential causes of autism in children. Although more recently medical research has used other etiological hypotheses to explain the disorder, blaming mothers with autistic children is still common. Many mothers with autistic children are still being blamed for their children's condition and behaviours as they are now expected to extensively contribute to children's development. Courcy & des Riviéres (2017) refer to "social isolation" (p. 233) as one of the consequences of such blaming. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I could not reach my family and friends for emotional support.

By Othering me, the doctor somehow reinforced and reproduced "positions of domination and subordination" (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 253). Perhaps the process of Othering was unintentional, but the doctor's "seemingly innocuous" (Johnson et al., 2004, p. 253) statements made me experience exclusion. I not only felt subordinated toward the doctor, but his dominant position made me feel genuinely guilty. He made me believe I was the one who was responsible for my daughter's condition. I needed to make a serious attempt to fight my way back to believing in myself again and move on.

Dignified risk. The dignified risk in this experience was when I decided to stop my daughter's therapy. It was a risk because by doing this I might have deprived my daughter of a treatment that could help her cope with the society. I was in an ethical dilemma in which I had to choose between continuing the disgraceful treatment and not having a treatment at all.

I always felt bad when I had to take my daughter to hospitals for injections. She cried with pain and I could not explain to her that it was necessary for her health. But this time it was all different. I did not believe in the treatment the therapist was giving to my daughter. The way I saw it, not only it did not do any good to her, but it was harmful. When I opened the door of the treatment room that day, my heart was full of fear and I was shaking all over. My motherly instinct told me that I should end it, but when we reached home I was not sure if I did the right thing. I was outraged hearing my child's cry and feeling her helplessness. There was not much time to evaluate actions and I had to do something quickly. To use Akita's (2006) words in her narrative essay about her resignation, my emotions at that instant "put me in a liminal, transitional stage and led me to make a major decision" (p. 67). In opposition to cultural expectations, I stood up, went toward the treatment room, opened the door, and took my daughter out of there; and all the time I was aware that I was taking a risk that could have a serious effect on my life.

My prayer that day immediately helped me with my confusion. It fulfilled my need for belonging, and provided me with both self-esteem and a feeling of control (Hales, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2016). The warmth I felt through my prayer assured me that I was not alone in that journey. I had done my best within the limit of my knowledge and my possibilities and I trusted that God would be by my side.

I knew I made the choice when I responded to my intuition. At the end of the prayer, my self-confirmation was back, I felt strong and thought I was in control of my life, no matter what happened next. The dignified risk I took that day was a cultural rebellion that led to an unlikely, unexpected, and astonishing event I call a miracle. The prayer experience – the miracle – not only brought about the gradual cure of my daughter but also restored my self-confidence, lightened my soul, and led to a better-lit corridor toward my self-knowledge. After all, the "essence of a miracle is none other than to permeate the heart and awaken the soul" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 148).

4- Australia: If Only You Think It Is Good for Me!

After I migrated to Australia, I tried to find a job in a university. I was a lecturer in my home country (Iran) and I very much liked my job. I applied to work in some universities in Melbourne. One by one they rejected me. They did not reject me directly, but told me that my CV was interesting and they would let me know if they felt they needed me. I realised, after a while, that that was a polite form of saying no. I then sent my university certificates to Vocational, Education and Training Assessment (VETASSESS) that assess migrants' skills. They approved my Bachelor's and Master's degrees, but did not recognise my Ph.D. After some deliberation on the situation, I guessed in order to find a job in a university in Australia, it might be a good idea to be recognised and find some connections. The best way to begin networking, it came to my mind, was to study for another Master and PhD in an Australian university. That way, I could also get familiar with the academic system which was new to me.

To study, however, I needed to get a scholarship and that appeared to be difficult. I consulted some friends who had lived in Melbourne for a few years and all of them told me getting a scholarship that could cover living expenses was almost impossible. With my husband's encouragement, I decided to apply anyway. Once, when I was living in Iran, I had applied for a course in Monash University that I had never attended. So, I chose Monash University as I had kept the emails and links and that made it easier for me to apply. I filled the application forms for Research Degree and Scholarship for Master of Education (part-time) and sent them.

In an informative session that I attended a few weeks later in the Faculty of Education I was again notified about the difficulty of getting a scholarship. The limited number of scholarships available was particularly mentioned in that session. However, someone from Monash Education Research Community (MERC), who had realised from my questions that I was interested in getting a scholarship, came to me right after the session and told me that in order to heighten my chance of getting the scholarship I needed to find a supervisor who would be interested in my research.

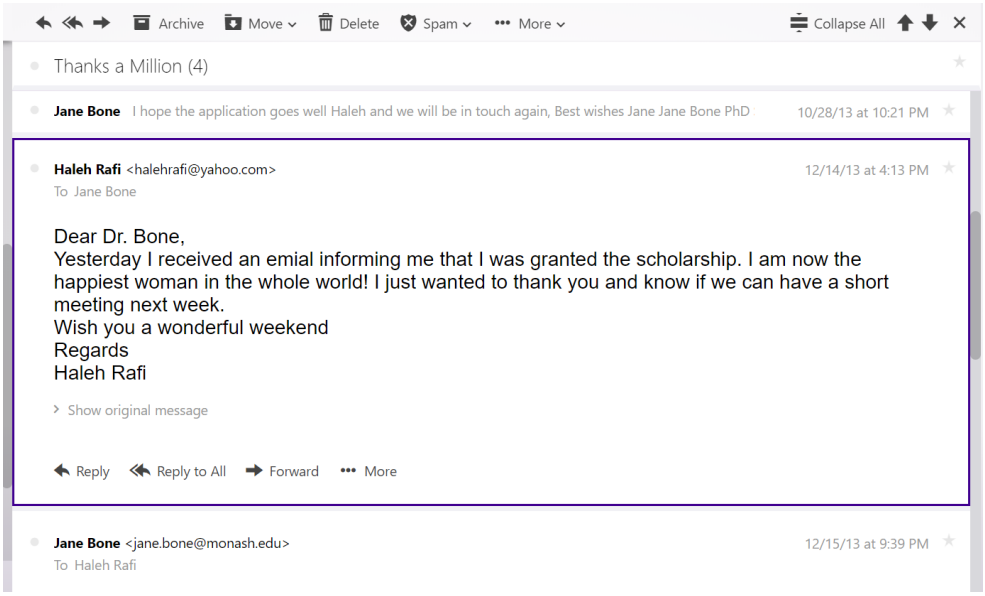
I had applied originally to research "teaching English as a foreign language in English and non-English speaking countries." I had been teaching English language in Iran, the United States, and Australia, and was thinking of using my previous experiences in the field for my new research. Therefore, I began looking at the profiles of the university lecturers to find someone who could be interested in the topic. I sent two requests to different lecturers working on "English as a second language" and both requests were rejected.

I continued my search till I found a lecturer whose profile made me surprised. She was interested in spirituality. Until then, I did not even know that doing research on spirituality was a possibility for me. Having engaged with Natural Spirituality for twenty years, I was eager to research in the area, without the restrictions that existed in Iran – to my knowledge, such research in Iran could cause serious problems for the researcher. On 24 October 2013, I sent an email to Dr. Jane Bone, mentioned my educational background, my interest in doing research on spiritualty, and briefly explained how it was a new area of study for me. I received an answer the day after. She was interested and indicated she was a possible supervisor. To me, that was more than an incident. It was a sign. Although I tried to keep my expectations low while I was waiting to get answer from the university, a hope and a desire lightened my heart.

That was the time I was working on keeping all materialistic wishes out of my prayers. I tried hard not to think about the scholarship in my conversations with God, but the thought was with me every day. Sometimes I wrote down my prayers in a notebook to concentrate better and also to keep a record of my prayers. On 20 November 2013, at the end of my daily prayer I wrote: "Why is it so hard to love you only for your sake? How can I truly eliminate worldly desires in my prayers? I cannot get my mind free from going back to university and doing research on spirituality. I have been trying my best to keep this out of my prayers, but you know best what is in my heart and in my mind. You know how much I want it. I am again in a situation that only your help can get me through. Can I have this, please, if you think it is good for me?"

The day after prayer, on 21 November 2013, I received a call from the university. Someone asked me a few questions regarding my application and then began to guide me to do things that might help me get the scholarship. She told me to change the application and apply for a full-time Ph.D. She suggested that I change my curriculum vitae (CV) and add my work experience in Melbourne – teaching piano lessons – to it. She said it could help to prove I had good oral communication skills. She also asked me to translate the title pages of the journals in which I had published two articles in Persian, and send them. In short, she helped me provide all the necessary documents that could assist with having my application accepted.

I was granted the scholarship. Later, when I told my friends in the university how I was helped to get the scholarship, they could hardly believe me. I could not ask the woman who had called me that day why she had helped me. I could not even thank her, as I had completely forgotten her name.



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Faith / doubt. In this story, my practices of attention-dialogue were focused on more details. I was practicing the second and third phases of the process of assimilating the ethical principle of praying with presence of heart: the phases of "reflection" and "memorization" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 53). For passing through these phases I needed to make a firm decision to practice the principle and "determine the means of practicing and cultivating it" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 54) to get ready for the phase of assimilation. I was trying to forego my ego, free my mind from any material desire while praying, and focus solely on "attracting divine satisfaction" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 59). I wanted to cultivate a deeper love toward God and practice to truly place myself in "His hands" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 59). During that time, I was somehow convinced that "it is not for us to decide what is good for us" (Dillon & Timotin, 2016, p. 2) and thus I tried to avoid asking for certain things to happen or not to happen to me in my prayers.

I was also practicing to "delve within" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 210) in my prayers and tried to find new facets of my imperious self. Therefore, instead of reciting words in my mind, I wrote my prayers in a diary. This way I could go through my prayers at different times and look for some unknown aspects of my self in them. The diary in which I wrote my prayers takes the form of an epistolary novel, containing my letters to God. Writing letters to God was more appealing to me than having a conversation with Him, because unlike having a conversation, when you write a letter to someone you do not expect an immediate answer. I wrote the letters and the answers came to me at a later time as inspirations. Another advantage of writing letters was that I had the chance to choose my sentences meticulously. I spent a long time thinking about what I wanted to say and sometimes revised the sentences in my head several times before I put them down.

Reflecting on my prayers of that period – from October 2013 to December 2013 – I found "freeing my mind from worldly entities" as one of the most difficult things to do. Although I began my prayers with deep sincerity, the duration of my concentration did not exceed a few seconds. Almost after writing each sentence I lost my directed attention. My mind was a busy intersection where material desires came and went and distracted me. As I needed to evaluate my practice every day, I scored my success based on the number of times I could manage to wave the distractions away (see pp. 105-106). Accepting that I could never truly be free of want, I tried to ignore my material desires in my prayers. I wrote to God to ignore them as well. The day I decided to mention the scholarship in my prayer, I considered it as a sort of confession. I was determined to clearly analyse a "flux of my thoughts" (B. Elahi, 2001, p. 71) and was reporting my mind to God, while I was trying to delve within. I knew that whatever happened – either I would get the scholarship or not – it would not affect my faith. However, the course of events went in a way that my faith became deeper. I could easily see God's footprints in things that happened afterwards. "This is what you wanted" God told me, "let us see what you will do with it."

Being Othered, or not! Being Othered can be defined as to become "the object of distorted conception" (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 299). Since I had been the object of distorted conception every time I moved to a new country, I was sort of expected to be Othered in every step I took in Australia. However, to my utmost surprise, it rarely happened. Everything went unexpectedly well after the day we arrived at the country in March 2013 when the officer who was checking passports in the airport gave our passports back with a charming smile on her face and told us: "Welcome to Australia"!

To us, who had been stopped in airports in many countries for interrogations, double checking of baggage, or fingerprinting due to our Iranian passports, hearing such a warm welcome was very pleasant; and the welcoming did not stop in the airport. I was in Australia only a week before I found a job as a piano teacher. I went for an interview, responding to an advertisement I found in the internet. In the interview, I explained that in spite of receiving piano lessons from one of the best musicians in the world, my lessons were not academic and I did not have any certificate to show. I also told my interviewees that I had been a piano teacher for twenty years, but again I could not provide any recommendation letter from an employer because I was a tutor. They believed me and accepted everything I said, asked me to play something for them on the piano, and called me a few hours after the interview to tell me I could begin working the day after.

I have similar welcoming stories in my diaries for when my husband found a job, when my daughter went to school, when I went to get my driving license, when we tried to be friendly with our neighbours, when I wanted to make friends in university, and so on and so forth. The most beautiful experience I have in my diaries goes back to a Three-Minute-Thesis competition in Monash University. I had been invited to "3MT Wild card competition" in which students who had previously won the people's choice award in their faculty were competing. The winner would go to the University competition with a wild card. We were six competitors and, to me, all the presentations were very interesting. The students were confident, they were funny, their explanations about their research were clear, and their research seemed really significant. When the judges were outside the room deciding who the winner was, I began thinking whom they would choose. The competitors were all women: three Iranians one of them with hijab, a young lady from East Asia, a black skinned beautiful lady, and an Australian.

My thoughts went like this: "It is easy to choose when one presenter is obviously better than others. But it is not easy in this case where everybody has been excellent. I think in such situations, people unconsciously choose the one with whom they have more in common. I guess the Australian woman will win the competition." Therefore, one can guess how surprised I was when the judges announced the Iranian woman with hijab as winner. The judges' choice made me very happy. If they had chosen me, I would have not been as happy. I adored their brave choice. I wrote in my diary that night (2 September 2015): "In such an anti-Muslim era they chose a Muslim woman. If she wins the Monash competition as well, she will be the University's representative and will go to Queensland. They did not think of it as a risky choice. She was not the Other for them. I love this country so much!!"

I have heard from some of my friends in Australia about how they were excluded in different situations; therefore, I cannot generalize to introduce Australia as an absolutely welcoming country only based on my own experiences. What I like the most in Australia is that people have acknowledged that I am culturally different from them, but they have never treated me as an Other in the negative sense. Maybe I just experienced the ideal in which people are "unbothered in their difference, different rather than othered" (Jaworski & Coupland, 2005, p. 688).

Getting the scholarship from Monash University provided me with the opportunity to comfortably research spirituality and share my experiences of practicing a different faith with other researchers. It gave me confidence to talk about my ideology and epistemology without being afraid of people's disapproval. Thanks to this opportunity, I have found a voice in me that had been silent for a long time. Now I see as my human duty to use this voice in order to help and encourage others to get theirs.

Dignified risk. The risk I took in this experience was deciding to go back to school. I was forty years old when my family and I came to Australia. I found a job within a week and my husband went to work in a month. We both loved what we were doing and together we earned more than we spent. The migration process was proving to be successful and after almost twenty years of marriage we were living comfortably. But then I began to feel restless: what about improving? I could be a piano teacher forever. My employees were very appreciative and my students, very motivating. I was completely satisfied with my job. So, why would I want to put myself into trouble? The answer was I felt responsible. Finally living in "the land of opportunities" (this is what I call Australia), I felt guilty not to use the facilities and resources available to me. When I was granted the scholarship, there remained no excuse.

The sense of responsibility gave dignity to the risk I took. Going to school as a full-time student, I had to work only part-time and limit the time and attention I gave to my family and friends. Besides, in the context of "challenge by choice" one should always consider factors like "fear of failure" and "fear of being laughed at" (Wallia, 2008, p. 40): fear of failure because like all researchers I was afraid my research would not contribute enough, and fear of being laughed at because I involved myself with a big responsibility at an age most of my friends get themselves ready to retire. But the risk was worth the trouble because what I could gain was very promising. Through this creative project I could significantly improve, both intellectually and spiritually. Doing this autoethnography has already cleared out many ulterior facets of my self. By taking the risk I made myself a "spiritual test" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 39) through which I could tangibly advance a few steps in my spiritual path.

I wrote a letter to God asking for a chance to research on spirituality. God answered my prayer by "sending me a package with a scholarship inside." "Create a challenge even when you are in your comfort zone!" I wrote in my diary on 2 October 2013, "… this is a risk I will always take."

Conclusion

Those who are interested in and engaged with spirituality look for different things in it. There is a perception of spirituality that says "it is all about being nice, kind and caring, or drinking the right kind of herbal tea" (Nicholls, 2007, p. 105). Some people look for peace of mind, some people expect protection from harms, and some are interested in paranormal powers. While I have sometimes received peace of mind or a feeling of being protected due to some of my practices, my main goal to be engaged with spirituality was gaining self-knowledge, and Natural Spirituality has provided me the necessary tools to do so.

To my understanding, Natural Spirituality is all about self-knowledge, and thus all its practices should help one to gain a better knowledge of self. However, it was not easy for me to relate some of the exercises to self-knowledge. For example, for years I could not see how praying could help me get a better knowledge of my self, and perhaps that was why I was not successful in most of my practices of prayer-attention. By doing this autoethnography I found out that a prayer experience, if analysed methodically, can tell me a great deal about my self. The content of prayer, the words one uses to pray, the reason for praying, the context in which one prays, and the effects of prayer on one's thoughts and actions can be interpreted in a systematic analysis and lead to significant findings for someone who explores the self.

The experiences I have analysed in this chapter were among those prayer experiences that had major impacts on my life. They had all the elements of a miracle for me and affected my faith specifically and my worldview generally. However, as one might expect, not all my prayers have been answered. Many of my prayer experiences remained unanswered, no matter how fervently I performed them.

In using a "principle thematic analysis" (Harrington, 2006, p. 175), in this chapter I have looked for recurrent patterns and contextual meanings in my prayer experiences and discussed three common themes – faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk – in them. I have unpacked my experiences into their constituent parts – the themes – in order to determine the relationship among them. In my analysis of the prayer experiences I have illustrated how my faith or my doubt affected my responses to being Othered and taking dignified risks. Inversely, I have also shown how my experiences of being Othered and taking the risks have had impacts on my faith.

In the next chapter, after analysing two other experiences, I synthesise and rearrange these constituent parts to identify "the main organizing principles" (Hart, 2000, p. 111) and show, in the conclusion of Chapter 7, how these principles could help me with more knowledge of my self.

Chapter 7 – Unanswered Prayers

Following the analysis of four experiences of answered prayers in Chapter 6, in this chapter I analyse two experiences of unanswered prayers. While the analysis in Chapter 6 was based on the concept of miracle, the analysis in this chapter is based on the spiritual notion of submission to God when a situation is not favourable in life. Thus, the chapter begins with a section on different meanings of "submission" and my personal understanding of it.

The next section of this chapter is the autoethnographic analysis of two of my experiences related to the notion of submission. At the beginning of this section, I explain how these experiences are different from the ones I analysed in the previous chapter, and why I consider them as epiphanies. Then, in their autoethnographic analyses of these experiences I illustrate how I responded to my unanswered prayers and how I was challenged to be surrendered to God's will. In the thematic analysis I again use the three themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk as analytical tools. However, especially in the case of the second story, these themes are viewed differently from the way I used them in the previous analyses, since I discuss questioning faith, self-Othering and not taking the dignified risk.

In the conclusion, which is the last part of this chapter, I sum up the key points of the chapter, and reiterate the significant messages of the three discussion chapters. I review how the constituent parts of the stories, when they are examined all together, reveal some organising principles that can lead to answering the research questions of the thesis, mentioned in Chapter 1. I also clarify with details how the analyses of the stories have helped me to obtain more knowledge of my self.

Submission to God

I begin my argument about the spiritual notion of submission by a poem written by Rumi (1979, pp. 135-136), in which he explains one of the highest stages of mysticism:

When the decree of God becomes the pleasure of man,
Then man desires the fulfilment of God's decrees;
And this too spontaneously, not in hope of reward,
But because his very nature is congruous therewith.
He desires not even his life for himself,
Nor is he relying on the hope of sweets of life to come.
Whatever path is taken by the eternal decree,
Whether it be life or death, 'tis all one to him.
He lives for the sake of God, not for wealth;
He dies for the sake of God, not in fear and grief.
His faith is based on his desires to do God's will,
Not on hope to gain paradise with its groves and founts.
His avoidance of infidelity is also for God's sake,
It proceeds not from fear of falling into fire.
Thus this temper of his arises from his very nature,
Not from any discipline and endeavour of his own.
At times he laughs when he contemplates God's pleasure,
God's decrees are to him as sweetmeats of sugar.
I ask, does not the world march agreeably to the will
And commands of a man rejoicing in this disposition?
Why, then, should such an one make prayers and petitions,
Saying, 'O God, change such and such a decree?'
… Why, therefore, should he make prayers
Unless he prays for what is pleasing to God?

As I explained in Chapter 3 (under the title of mysticism), mystics are those who let go of all their desires in their journey toward their Beloved. Rumi's (1979) poem explains the aspects of submission where the truth seeker's ultimate joy is to fulfil God's command.

Submission to God is an important, yet controversial, notion in many religions. It is a significant feature of the largest Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – stemming from the ultimate act of submission when God requested Abraham to sacrifice his son. In her essay on the submission of Abraham, Greenberger (2017) explains that Abraham needed to pass the tests of resignation and full submission to reach wholeness. Although practicing unconditional submission was beyond pain for Abraham, by completely submitting to God he left a rich legacy, inspiring future generations to have full faith in God:

> although all [people] hope and pray that sacrifices will be few and far between, if called upon to make sacrifices, large or small, they will draw strength from Abraham who stood up steadfastly to [his] ultimate test, … against his nature and against the nature of any father to his son. (Greenberger, 2017, p. 78)

Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2007) in his teachings explains that Abraham had asked God to perform a miracle for him to be reassured. As a consequence of his request, God asked him to sacrifice his son, and Abraham accepted God's command unconditionally. What helped Abraham to succeed in such an act is related to the law of divine love that says: "one who has experienced even a mere instant of divine love would readily do anything to defend the divine cause and rejoin Him" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 39). Like many people in the history of religion, including John the Baptist and Joan of Arc, "Abraham's love for God was so strong that when he was asked to sacrifice his own son he accepted without hesitation" (B. Elahi, 1999, p. 40) and by doing this, he reached a higher spiritual stage (B. Elahi, 1995).

Submission is a significant aspect of Islam. In fact, the word Islam literally means "the ability to submit to God" (Zaman, 2015, p. 390) and Islam is sometimes defined as the belief in "the ideal of submission to God and only to God, and freedom from submission to all else" (El Fadl, 2014, p. 111). However, like all abstract notions in the contexts of religion and spirituality, research shows different interpretations for the notion of submission to God. In some radical views, it might be seen as a formulaic relationship "based on a stereotyped understanding of one's self dealing with a stereotypical understanding of an omnipotent but inaccessible God" (El Fadl, 2014, p. 123). But when submission goes beyond being obedient, it can be interpreted as "aspiring to and seeking the goodness of God, and liberating one's soul" (El Fadl, 2014, p. 123). Thus, by submitting to God people hope they can be free from earthly desires and develop spiritually. Submission can also be seen as living "according to the reality of our primordial nature (*fitrah*), which we still hear deep in our souls" (Nasr, 2014, p. 85). By living based on their primordial nature, people can fulfil the purpose for which they have been created.

In Ostad Elahi's philosophy (B. Elahi, 2005), submission can be achieved in three stages. The first stage is "contentment in the general sense" (p. 92), in which spiritual students try to be mentally content with the outcome of their efforts, prefer divine satisfaction to their own satisfaction, and impose God's will upon their own with the help of reason, self-suggestion and the power of faith. The second stage is "surrender" (p. 93) at the end of which spiritual students wholeheartedly accept the divine will and desire nothing but divine satisfaction. It is in the second stage of submission that consequential changes appear in spiritual students, "humility replaces pride, altruism replaces selfishness, detachment replaces attachment" (p. 93), and a state of serenity and satisfaction manifests within them.

The third stage is "contentment in the specific sense" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 93), in which truth seekers will embody divine will, and in everything they do and think, the cause stems from the Source. It is only in this stage that they can feel a conscious and unconditional love for all creatures, for they see the Source in everything. At this point, truth seekers will have almost reached the end of their journey where "the pre-automatic period comes to an end, the automatic gear is activated, and God Himself accomplishes what remains to be done" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 148) to complete their path of perfection. This third stage is by some means comparable to the stage of enlightenment of Zen Buddhism (Papademetriou, 2015).

The first time I read about these stages, I was amazed by the paradoxical situation in which one gets all the power only after becoming totally conscious of one's "nothingness" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 147). Realizing they are "nothing," truth seekers can eventually be in a God-like position where the wavelength of their will is aligned with the divine will, their will "becomes compatible with that of the Source" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 95), and everything they do embodies divine contentment (B. Elahi, 2009). It was astonishing to see that spiritual submission is followed by spiritual power (Buturovic, 1997), as if the only way one can reach the highest position passes through the lowest level where one demolishes one's pride.

The third stage of submission, to me, was as much astounding as it was unreachable. I had to struggle tremendously just to practice the first stage. Thus, I presently set aside the sensational concept of unity with the Source in the third stage and, looking for the practical aspect of spiritual notions in Ostad Elahi's philosophy, tried to focus on the stage of contentment in the general sense. In order to enter that stage, I needed to assign spiritual practices that helped me be mentally content with things that happened to me beyond my control, and "not to complain" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 92), either inwardly or outwardly, in difficult situations.

In Natural Spirituality, submission and humility are attributes that can lead to a mature behaviour in which one trusts and relies on a superior guiding force and is willing to peacefully wait for Him to intervene (Klein, 2016). According to B. Elahi (2005), "the more mature the soul, the more we are naturally submitted to the divine will" (p. 90). At the same time, in Natural Spirituality spiritual students are always encouraged not to stay in a passive state and try to change uncomfortable situations by using all the legitimate tools at their disposal in an intelligent way (B. Elahi, 2005).

Different meanings of passivity related to the notion of submission have also been discussed in other ideologies. In his book on Eastern philosophies, Harrison (2013) explains that in Daoism "harmony, or balance, is not achieved through strenuous activity but requires a certain kind of passivity that will allow one to go along with the flow" (p. 134), and for the Daoist of the *Daodejing*, integrity and authenticity is achieved when one lives in and acts spontaneously in accordance with the Dao. However, Daoism also acknowledges that passivity alone is not enough and one needs to be receptive and responsive to one's situation. In fact, passivity in Daoism does not mean restraint from all action, but its aim is to bring about results through what one might call non-action:

> 'Non-action' is a central concept in Daoism. However, the Chinese term is *wu-wei* and the translation 'non-action' doesn't quite capture what is important to a Daoist. The emphasis in Daoist thought is that in doing nothing one might actually be bringing something about. While standing still may in a sense be doing nothing, it is bringing about the result that the water becomes clear. A rather more accurate translation of *wu-wei* might then be 'activity that does not disrupt the natural way of things'. (Harrison, 2013, p. 139)

The juxtaposition of the notions of action and non-action, or submission and making attempts to change undesirable situations, has always confused me. My practices of submission never moved further than the first stage, which was contentment in the general sense, but even in that stage the exercises were difficult for me because I did not know precisely where and when I needed to stop fighting or persisting, and begin to accept the situation. In two of my experiences that come below, I analyse my struggles to find to the best of my ability and knowledge how to practice submission in situations that happened to me after some prayers went unanswered.

The Autoethnographic Analysis

Spiritual autoethnographies sometimes illustrate "how a belief system in general can be used to both rationalize and empower a person in times of trouble" (Crawley, 2014, p. 232). In the process of revisiting the stories I am writing in this section, I show the thinking process in my mind as I was challenged by difficult situations and confronted dilemmas, and explain how Natural Spirituality empowered me in times of trouble.

Although many details in the following stories have come from my memory, I mostly used my diary entries for writing these stories. I could get the relevant information from my diaries because they are sort of "soul journal[s]" (J. P. Miller, 2000, p. 73); because my writings in my diaries focus on my inner life and contain my feelings and thoughts related to different events. Reading my diaries after a long time felt strange. They first moved me "to stillness" (Lockford, 2002, p. 76), I took pause to feel the situations again and reflect over them; and once having taken that time, I moved to action to write the stories and then analyse them.

The Stories – Unanswered Prayers

In the stories that follow I write about my experiences as something extremely remote and exotic. I call the author of these stories an "externalized insider" (Hayden, 2014, p. 191), accentuating the distance with which I have positioned myself during composition. The narrator I of this chapter has slightly changed from the narrator I of Chapters 5 and 6. The first story in this chapter happened over the span of seven years. In order to review all those years in my mind and provide relevant details I needed to distance myself further than what I did in writing stories in two previous chapters. In the case of the second story, I needed the longer distance because the pain of writing was acute. As Flemons and Green (2002) explain, some stories are untellable because one does not know how to tell them. Such stories make the author a vulnerable storyteller, as the narrator constantly needs to think what stories not to tell. In the second story below, the narrator I is surely a vulnerable storyteller.

1- Iran + The United States of America: Going Back to University

First attempt: I began to study statistics in university in 1989. Statistics was not my favourite subject when I finished high school, but after studying it for four years at university my interest was piqued and I wanted to know further about it. So, I started to study for the entrance exam for a master's degree in statistics in the last year of my bachelor's studies. A few months before I graduated with a bachelor's degree, in July 1994, I attended the entrance exam for the master's degree. I did not believe in God then. I did not pray. The exam was more difficult than I imagined. I failed.

Second attempt: I decided to prepare myself for the exam in the following year. Talking to some of my friends who had been accepted into the master's degree, I learned that an interesting major was on offer in universities with a high level of employability. It was related to both statistics and environment. I purchased the required texts and studied hard for almost a year. In July 1995, I attended the entrance exam for a master's degree in "environmental statistics." At that time I had just begun engaging with spirituality and praying was not among the spiritual exercises I practiced. I went through the exam without praying. I passed the exam, and was accepted to Shiraz University. The university was located in a city far from Tehran where I lived then. Unfortunately, after being accepted, I found that commuting there was a serious difficulty. I could not go to Shiraz twice a week, I did not enrol and I lost the opportunity to go back to university that year.

Third attempt: In June 1996, following a plan to migrate to the United States, I went to France for a relatively short time, and then on to California. The moment I settled in the United States, I began searching possible ways to go to university. I decided to begin anew and study music. I asked God to help me be brave for the big project I had in mind. I studied for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam for a few months, passed with a pleasing score, applied for a bachelor's degree in music in College of the Canyons, was accepted and received a student visa in August 1997. However, after studying at the College for only two months I had to return to Iran because of family circumstances. This was somehow disappointing for me as I had managed to attract my teachers' attention due to my hard work.

Fourth attempt: Back in Iran, I decided to shift my studies to English language and literature. That was a subject I had always dreamed of studying, ever since I was a teenager. The new situation of my life and what I had learned in my travels gave me courage to take this daunting step. Again I asked God for help, purchased the resources and studied hard until very close to the entrance exam. However the blessing of becoming pregnant prevented my attendance at the exam in June 1988, as my baby was due to be born in July.

Fifth attempt: Still having the passion to go back to university, I returned to my studies six months after my daughter was born. At that time, confronting my new responsibilities, I was distracted often and was unable to be as systematic in my studies as I would prefer. I asked God in my prayers to help me get focused and more organised, and managed to study a few hours every day. By June 1999, I had a reasonable knowledge of the content of the novels, short stories and dramas I was required to know for the exam. But my knowledge was not enough on the other necessary subjects and I failed the entrance exam for the master's degree in English language and literature.

Sixth attempt: Immediately after I knew I was failed, I thought about ways to improve the system of my studies. I purchased some guide books that could help me with the subject of literary criticism and planned a method to memorise the content of *The Norton anthology of English literature* (Abrams, 1986). I confidently attended the entrance exam for a master's degree in English language and literature in June 2000. At the beginning of the exam I had a short prayer and asked God to help me answer the questions correctly.

I was happy when the exam was finished. I had the feeling that I had received God's help and thought that I would pass. Indeed, I answered most questions correctly. However, my competitors were still better than me that year and because the university could accept only a limited number of applicants, I failed, again.

Seventh attempt: A few months later, thinking of getting professional help, I registered for a "preparation for entrance exam" course – in a private institute – specifically held for potential students seeking to study a master's degree in English language and literature. The place where the classes were held was very far from our home. It took me two hours to commute there, and the same time to return home. The classes took place in the evenings and sometimes I reached home very late at night. My husband was not happy about this because our city was not very safe when it was dark, especially for women. I persisted going to classes nevertheless, and studied hard on the days I did not have a class. I bought several test booklets that had examples of the questions in the entrance exams and practiced them daily. In June 2001 I attended the exam. I had a short prayer before the exam begins, made it a funny conversation with God, asked Him if He was surprised of my stubbornness, and demanded Him to answer every other question for me: "I answer the even questions and You answer the odd ones. Question number one … it is Your turn God!!"

I passed the exam. I went to university, and continued to the end and succeeded in being awarded a Master's degree in 2004.

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Faith / doubt.

For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business. (Eliot, 1940, p. 14)

"How many times are you going to try?" This was the question people around me started to ask when I was in the midst of my fourth attempt. Some just made funny jokes of my attempts of going back to university, giving me nicknames that can be translated as "always behind the university's door" or "the girl from whom universities run away." Some show their concern: "You are living a comfortable life. Why do you want to put yourself in trouble? Do you know how difficult it is to both study and being a mother? What will happen to your family? If your husband does not get enough attention from you, he might look for attention in other places!! Your daughter might go astray, having a busy student-mother." Some criticised me: "There is more to life than going to university. You can get the knowledge by reading, you do not need to go to university. You are so obsessed with getting a degree!" Some discussed with me philosophically: "Don't you see the message the universe / God is sending you? Why don't you surrender? Do you enjoy being failed? Maybe a master's degree is not meant for you. Why don't you change your aim and focus on another thing?" And the intensity of jokes, concerns, philosophical conversations and criticisms heightened with every new attempt I made.

I was affected by all the questions and conversations mentioned above because no matter how bitter they were to me, I could find some truth in all of them. Before people started talking to me, I told them in my mind: "What might you tell me that I haven't told myself a thousand times?" However, I was in love with going back to university and, like people who are in love, I saw only the beautiful features of it.

Reviewing my diary entries, I may claim that I had the intuition that I would go back to university. I dreamed about studying and doing research, I saw myself being graduated and becoming a university lecturer. Using spiritual vocabulary, I might say I had faith that I could do it. But what kind of faith was that? Was it a faith in God or a faith in me?

In one of his sayings on using willpower, Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1995, saying 506) explained a spiritual law in which if one truly and wholeheartedly decided to accomplish something which was decent and ethical, it would be impossible not to receive help from the Source. I was relying on that help and had faith that I would receive it if I was persistent and kept my motivation alive. When I failed in my fifth attempt, I told myself that my efforts were not enough, that I did not have a comprehensive knowledge necessary to pass the exam. But after I failed in my sixth attempt, doubt appeared in my mind.

I tried to have a systematic analysis of my failure. Why did not I receive the help of the Source? In different entries of my diaries I asked myself what part of the spiritual law I had not observed:

- Was I true and honest in my decision?
- Had I decided to do it wholeheartedly?
- Was what I wanted to do something decent and ethical?

In the attempts I made to answer these questions I repeatedly confessed that I did not have enough knowledge of my self. I could not go deep into my conscious and pre-conscious mind to know what my true intentions were. Also I did not have practical knowledge of spiritual terms. What was an honest decision? What did it mean to decide wholeheartedly? Was planning to go back to university a decent decision or was I transgressing the rights of my family? Should I dedicate my life to the comfort of my family and raise a good child? And every question was followed by more and more questions.

Another argument related to my failure was that I had perhaps received the help of the Source but not in the way I expected. I thought perhaps higher education was not meant for me. God did not want me to go back to university because he had something else for me. Was I supposed to think of doing a different thing, like improving my music abilities? I was completely lost and did not know what to do.

As explained in Chapter 3, being in doubt sometimes means "being undecided" (Rees, 1993, p. 280). I was undecided for a while. However, apparently I was more stubborn than to surrender. Soon my love of academic study exceeded my doubt and I decided to try once more. I reminded myself of the story of Amir Timur Gourkan (14th Century AD) in one of Ostad Elahi's sayings (B. Elahi, 2007, saying 416) who, running from a battle that was against him, hid in some old ruins deciding to starve himself to death. There he saw an ant that tried to carry a grain much bigger than itself on a wall. Time after time the ant fell down to the ground half way through, only to get up and start the climb all over again. When eventually and after many attempts the ant managed to carry the grain to its nest, Timur, who was watching the ant all along, changed his mind, started another war, defeated his rivals and became one of the greatest emperors of his time.

I also found another saying of Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2007, saying 149) in which he reminded his students of the importance of spiritual trials in every seeker's path and mentioned that sometimes trials were there to test if the seekers were truly determined in their attempts. On 26 October 2000 I recorded the result of my analysis in my diary. I wrote that to the extent I knew my inner self and my intentions what I wanted to accomplish was both a decent thing to do and something doable; and I set a detailed "I can do it" exercise for myself to put aside my doubt, at least for a while, and keep my motivation high to move on.

Sometimes I think believing in myself was one of the reasons for my success. I have read many stories – both in fiction and biographies – in which success followed one's belief in oneself. One of these stories, which has happened in real life, belonged to Roger Bannister. At the time of the story, in 1950s, there were some popular and clinical assumptions about human capability that said it was impossible for human body to run a mile in under four minutes. Even the runners who had tried said that there was an invisible wall that prevented them (O'Neill, 2014). However, on 6 May 1954, Roger Bannister ran a mile in three minutes 59.4 seconds, because, as he said himself, he believed that it could be done (O'Neill, 2014). The interesting fact is that only 46 days after Bannister ran a mile in less than four minutes, John Landy of Australia broke Bannister's record and ran a mile in three minutes and 57.9 seconds in Finland (O'Neill, 2014). Apparently after Bannister's "barrier-breaking sub-4-minute mile" (Henderson, 1994, p. 18) proved that the popular and clinical assumptions about the limitations of human body were incorrect, it became easier to run a mile in less than four minutes. The magic phrase was to believe it was possible and it could be done.

I can also define my faith at that period of my life as believing in what I had not seen (Coyne, 2015). As I have explained in Chapters 1 and 2, to experiment with a spiritual law one needs to have the basic theoretical knowledge both in the realm of the self and the metaphysical world (B. Elahi, 1999). As I knew I did not have enough knowledge, I guessed my experimentation was not without errors, and I was not sure about the results of my analysis. However, I decided to believe in something in me that I could not see, and that was an ability to attract the divine help to fulfil a task I thought was good for both my material and spiritual development.

I was so insistent in my decision that I chose to focus on "the efficacy of prayer to alter the course of events" (Anvar, 2012, p. 67) in my prayer practices. Planning for my seventh attempt I again asked for God's help the way it was recommended in Natural Spirituality (B. Elahi, 1995). I told God in my prayer exercises that I knew I could do it if only He wanted to. I told God that I was going to practice "resignation and detachment" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 65): that I decided to do my best with what God gave me, to try again to pass the entrance exam as a practice of perseverance (B. Elahi, 1987), and I would try to leave the result to Him as a practice of surrender. On 29 October 2000, I wrote in my diary: "My dear God, I have faith in You, and I have faith in me … people ask me how many times I am going to try this. The answer is I try as many times as it takes. Until I know better, I will never stop. I either will go back to university, or I will die trying to. If I never succeed, people can say that I was not capable of going back to university, but no one can say I did not try," and I drew a big beautiful smiley face next to my writing. ☺

Being Othered. During the experience explained above, from 1997 to 2001, I was confronted with a new way of becoming an Other in a spiritual context. I had been spiritually Othered before in two different situations. First, when my theological ideas had not matched with common beliefs of my religious relatives and friends, and second when my faith had been regarded as "not intellectual" in the eyes of my atheist friends and relatives. However, in the midst of my attempts to go back to university I realised that I was also an Other among my relatives and friends who practiced Natural Spirituality. This new way of Otherness stemmed from differences in spiritual identities and different interpretations of spiritual laws.

Spiritual identity, to my understanding, is shaped not in submission to a particular set of spiritual concepts, but by identification with particular experiences (hooks, 2003). Researchers maintain that spiritual identity is dependent on and shaped through the narratives one creates to explain one's quest for meaning (Reimer & Dueck, 2012; Ruffing, 2012). Thus, people who believe in the same spiritual concepts might have different spiritual identities, because they create different stories to interpret spiritual concepts.

The notion of self-resignation is an equivocal notion in Natural Spirituality. The term is open enough to be interpreted differently, because a person who tries to self-resign is "under the law of the middle way, that is, neither absolute determinism nor absolute free will" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 58). Sometimes repeated failures can be translated as a spiritual sign for spiritual voyagers to show them the way they are going is not the right way. I could relate to that interpretation and found it logical. However, in that particular experience of mine, perhaps because of my different spiritual identity, I had a different story in mind. I found my repeated failures as a spiritual test that examined the extent of my perseverance and my determination. The narrative I had created was not liked by some of my friends who also practiced Natural Spirituality. They saw me as a person who was too proud to take no for an answer and interpreted spiritual signs to her favour.

My friends' comments and criticism had always been important for me and many times had guided me to find a solution to my problems. However, in this case being Othered was so much of a burden to me that I tried my best to avoid speaking about my attempts, my doubts and my decisions to them. Although I was never sure that my narrative was the right one, I did not want to hear them talk against it. But then something happened that I decided to try consulting them once more.

One day, in late October 2000, when I was thinking about my experiences trying to figure out the right thing to do a luminous dream filled my thought. I saw myself in an image, walking in a university campus, holding a few books in my arms. What was it? Where did the image come from? Was it a spiritual vision? An epiphany is usually "invisible and private" (Cox, 2005, p. 42). While on the outside things seem pretty much as usual, something spontaneous takes place in the inside that makes time seem to stand still and lights up the mind. In search of a meaning for the image, I made a narrative in which the right thing to do was to pursue my dream.

I recorded the dream in my diary and talked about that image with my friends only once. One of them told me that people see what they like to see; and then I stopped talking about it all together. Unlike usual situations, the comment did not pose a question for me. The image was too clear to let my faith falter. Being Othered among the friends who were also engaged in Natural Spirituality was heartbreaking, but it led me into a greater understanding of life. I learned that people have different spiritual identities, have different narratives of spiritual principles, and have their own spiritual journey. I also learned that sometimes a spiritual experience needed to be kept private – unless, of course, one wanted to analyse it in a PhD thesis.

Dignified risk. The risk I discuss in this section is a spiritual risk related to my study attempts. In the early days of my seventh attempt, before I decided for certain, my mind resembled a pendulum that swung from "Why should I do it?" to "Why should I not?". I had a list of reasons that pushed me back, and had an answer in my mind for every item in the list. I knew I wanted to do it and my biggest concern was that "What if I am wrong?"

I prayed for help, asked God to inspire me about the right thing to do, and at the same time I tried to combine my prayers with action. I searched in Ostad Elahi's sayings (B. Elahi, 1987; 1995) for clues to distinguish the voice of my angelic soul and that of my imperious self. Then I tried to prepare a list of my rights and duties. Two examples of my inner arguments can be illustrated as below:

- As Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1993a) explained, there is a hierarchy of duties that God has established for all human beings: "first our duties towards our angelic soul; then our duties towards our body, our spouse, our children, parents, family, friends, society, and so on" (pp. 78-79). I knew I had duties toward my husband and daughter, but in the hierarchy of duties I was first responsible for myself. Thus, my legitimate passion for studying could be prioritised over the comfort of my husband and my daughter.

- In Natural Spirituality it is considered that "our duty on earth is to educate ourselves in order to become a source of good and benefit for others" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 77). I knew that in this sentence, the word "education" mostly referred to spiritual education. However, I thought if I gained other sorts of education, like academic education, I still could make myself more useful in society. Concerning my husband and my daughter, I told myself that I might pay less attention to them while studying; however in the long run my education would benefit my family too. I could get a well-paid job as a lecturer in a university and become a role model for my daughter as a studious woman.

Was I selfish? I knew many mothers who sacrificed and ceased to follow their dreams because of their children. Some of them were not happy women, though. I had friends who told me they had never received gratitude for their sacrifice and how regretful they were. I was so obsessed with studying that I thought I would suffer serious depression if I did not go back to university. Would I be a good wife and mother if I became depressed?

I had to find a solution to the never-ending questions in a dignified manner. I knew that in Natural Spirituality, intention played an important role in the consequences of one's actions (B. Elahi, 1987; 1995). I thought about my intention. I did not even know if my intention was truly to attract divine satisfaction. I told God, as recorded in my diary on 29 October 2000, that "according to the current knowledge of my self my intention is decent and benevolent," that "what I wanted to do is not contrary to morality," and that "I thought I had to take the risk"; and then I began to pray for God to help me with that dignified risk.

2- Iran: I Will *Live* for You

The story I am writing here is an experience of a period of suffering. I do not write about what happened to me because of two reasons. First, because writing about something that had caused so much pain is too agonising for me. Second, because it is not relevant to the focus of the story. This story is supposed to illustrate my behaviour in a time that I was in pain and my prayer was not answered. Explaining about the cause of pain not only is unnecessary but might end up as a distraction. Thus, I appeal to the reader to focus on my behaviour and reactions in that period and to appreciate the situation rather than my appeasing their curiosity.

One of the most difficult things I have ever experienced in my life happened to me in November 2005. The first few weeks of the hardship were spent in shock. It took me some time to pull myself together and try to think of what I should do. The situation was extremely painful and I could not find a way to get out of it. At first I tried to change the situation, but when I realized that I was not strong enough to do so, I made an attempt to accept it and cope with it. I exerted myself in finding a practical way to change my attitude toward the situation – as advised by counsellors – until the time I hated all motivational quotes. I knew by then that, as I wrote in my diary on 2 March 2006, "the days that break you are *not* the days that make you. They are the days that destroy you, erase you, and terminate you."

In early April 2006 I accepted that what had happened was beyond my endurance. I could not eat; I could not sleep; I was losing weight; and I constantly felt a pain in my chest that made breathing difficult. I could not concentrate on my studies and I did not want to talk to anyone. Never in my life had I felt so completely helpless.

The state of affairs seemed to make me closer to God. During that period I continually prayed and talked to God all the time. I believed I was in the middle of a serious spiritual test that I needed to pass in order to go to the next stage of my spiritual education. I was very careful not to ask God for anything material. My prayers contained only two requests: give me wisdom to know what the right thing to do is; and give me courage to do so. That was my mantra then, and I said it hundreds of times every day.

On 13 April 2006 I had an exceptional prayer experience. I squatted down on the bed, put my forehead on my knees and thought of God. There was nothing particular in my mind, no wishes or requests. As I remember, I was thinking of the pain in my chest, to which I had sort of been accustomed, and tried to adjust my breathing in a way that it hurt a little less. Suddenly I felt a warmth and I sensed something was embracing me.

I had experienced that warmth once before. It had been followed by a miracle in my life (see the third story in Chapter 6). My heart began to beat faster and for a moment I felt I was weightless. The pain in my chest disappeared and a sense of pure joy was filled in. "You have come to take me" I said happily, and then I began to passionately thank Him. It was time to die. That was the beautiful ending of my spiritual test. I told Him how much I loved Him and repeatedly asked Him to take me with Him: "Please! If You think I have learned enough, if you think I have done well, do take me with you! I am ready."

I do not know how long I was in that position, but gradually the embracing arms and the warmth went away. I did not open my eyes, but I knew that He was gone; and He did not take me with Him. To my utmost disappointment I was still alive. I felt empty and heavy at the same time, and the pain was back. I raised my head, opened my eyes and with deep grief told him: "So, I do not even deserve to die?" I was really disappointed, but tried to feel better by reminding myself that good things could happen a little later. In my previous similar experience, miraculous things had started to happen from the next day. I could have a stroke that night or a car accident the day after; or I could be diagnosed with a terminal illness in the coming days.

But days passed and nothing happened. There was no stroke or accident. Some small wounds appeared on my hands in a few days after that event. I went to a doctor to see if they were a form of skin cancer, but they were not. The wounds appeared due to the temporary malfunctioning of my immune system and disappeared after some time.

The idea of committing suicide came to my mind at the end of April, but I did not see it as a good choice. It seemed like quitting, like being defeated. I wanted to pass the spiritual test successfully. On 30 April 2006 I wrote a letter to God in my diary: "If only I could find myself in a situation in which I could die for You, to show you how much I love You. How fortunate was Joan of Arc and all the other martyrs who lost their lives gloriously for You … But they should have reached a spiritual level where they deserved to have the chance. And apparently I have not reached that level." Feeling desperate I wrote to God that I could not hear Him anymore and asked Him for the thousandth time what it was that He wanted me to do. It was after writing that letter, in a long and emotional contemplation, that I decided to resign. I decided to stop fighting, even stop thinking about what to do, and allow myself to go along with the flow. I decided to start the phase of non-action. "You want me to live?" I wrote in my diary on 1 May 2006 with a heavy heart. "Then I will live. To show how much I love You, … I will *live* for You!" And I cried, a cry that lasted for hours, or metaphorically for days.

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Faith / doubt.

> [The] English word *doubt* comes from the Latin *dubitare* which is rooted in an Aryan word meaning 'two'. … to believe is to be 'in one mind' about accepting something as true; to disbelieve is to be 'in one mind' about rejecting it. To doubt is to waver between the two, to believe and disbelieve at once and so to be 'in two minds'. (Guinness, 1976, p. 17)

2006 was the year I struggled most with my spiritual practices. Some of the biggest question marks I have in my spiritual books appeared in that period. These questions came to my mind because the new situation of my life demanded me to practice some ethical principles I had never practiced before. Like scholars whose faith "accounts for the devotion and dedication of their work" (Purpel, 1989, p. 60) I was devoted to my spiritual path; but as I realised I did not understand some aspects of spiritual laws, I was in two minds.

The challenging questions put my faith at risk, but I saw the doubt as an inevitable part of my spiritual journey. After all, doubt "is the great risk undertaken in all genuine theological enquiry, and if our faith is unable to take this risk, it is not faith at all" (Rees, 1993, p. 296). I doubted about the practicality of some sayings of Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987; 1995) as I began practicing them; and then I searched to resolve the conflicts and find answers. Sometimes I found convincing answers; sometimes I did not. Some of the question marks of that period are still there in my books.

In this section, I discuss three of the question marks – one of them erased and two that are still there. I also explain my process of thinking – based on my education of thought back then – toward resolving the doubts.

The first question mark I discuss here was related to the prayer that was not answered the way I expected. In one of his sayings, Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2005) explained "If we invoke the Source in difficult situations with the same anguish and heartfelt excitement as that of a person stranded in the middle of the ocean on a sinking boat, He will respond to us" (p. 162) (see page 37). When I asked God to take me with Him that day, I truly felt being alone in a sinking boat. Never before I had prayed with such heartfelt excitement. I expected God to grant me my wish and take me with Him as a reward for all my efforts and patience in the past months. When I found myself alive at the end of the prayer, I was not only disappointed but also confused. "If spirituality is a science, a spiritual law should work in each and every experiment" I thought. I had all the conditions in the above saying; why then I did not receive "the" response? Why was my wish not fulfilled?

The question mark I put in my book was quickly erased. In a later reflection on my prayer experience, I thought perhaps God *had* answered me, but the answer was not what I expected. On second thoughts, I translated God's response as "Your efforts were not enough, you need to do better, your education has not finished yet, you need to stay alive and you need to continue learning." Besides, I soon confessed to myself that I had overestimated both my efforts and my pain. I compared my situation to all those people in the world who were suffering for various reasons and fought bravely, and was ashamed for being so expectant. I reminded myself that a prayer practice for a truth seeker should not be a petitionary prayer. I also reminded myself that students of spiritual university needed to consider this earthly life as a place of education for the life beyond, and they had to practice ethical principles as their human duty and with no expectations. I erased the question mark after my second thoughts, but that did not help me to feel better.

The second question mark I put in my book (B. Elahi, 1987) was related to the notions of revenge and forgiveness. Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987) always encouraged his spiritual students to avoid retaliation and to be kind, helpful and forgiving toward those who have wronged them. Before that period of my life, I had never thought about practicing forgiveness. In the new situation though, I thought as a spiritual student I was morally obliged to consider that practice. In fact, forgiveness was one of the ways I could respond to the situation. But when I wanted to clarify the details of the practice, I realised that I had no idea how to do it. I did not know how practically I could forgive someone. So, I decided to do some research.

I began my research with gathering all of Ostad Elahi's sayings about forgiveness. I wrote the sayings in a notebook and read them over a few times. Some of the sayings were about the circumstances students needed to consider when they wanted to forgive, like being careful not to be abused or to transgress someone else's rights. But, to my understanding, the sentences generally demanded spiritual students to forgive, no matter what; and then the questions came. For example, in one of sayings (B. Elahi, 1987) Ostad Elahi stated that revenge never led to pleasure, whereas forgiveness always yielded happiness and delight. I thought otherwise. I knew that I took much earthly pleasure even in imagining bad things happened to those who had wronged me, and could not foresee any pleasure in forgiving them. In another of his sayings, Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987, saying 238) stated that "how commendable it is to do good and if wronged, be ready to forgive." That was the saying next to which I put a question mark. Was Ostad Elahi talking about saints or super humans? Was practicing that principle even possible for an ordinary spiritual student like myself?

In Natural Spirituality, it is considered that "the more advanced a soul becomes, the more it derives pleasure from forgiveness rather than revenge" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 115). I knew that my questions and my feelings toward forgiveness were derived from the fact that I did not have an advanced soul. But I was also concerned about justice. Ever since I was a child I felt extremely happy when the bad guy in a motion picture or an animation got punished. "Why should we let people who have wronged us go unpunished?" I asked myself. I thought about an extreme case in which a woman was attacked by acid and lost her eyesight. "Does God want the woman to forgive the assailant?"

Through history, in what W. I. Miller (2006) called "Talionic cultures" (p. x), justice has been served by means of retaliation authorised by law. The biblical notion of eye for an eye as a form of retributive justice is still sometimes literally applied in some countries in the world, including contemporary Iran. As an example, there is a law in Iran that says a criminal who attacks someone with acid and causes blindness of his victim could be punished by being forced to lose his eyesight with drops of acid, unless the victim forgives the assailant. In a real case that happened in Iran, this rule became controversial in the country. Newspapers published interviews and articles in which people considered the law as cruel and asked the victim to be a graceful human being and forgive the criminal.

I was very much against any kind of violence, but at that time I asked myself why the criminal should have been left unpunished. He was not even regretful for what he had done. I did not consider dropping acid into the assailant's eyes as a just punishment. It was much less than what he deserved! He should have been punished exactly like what he did to that young woman. Why did nobody think of that woman and her suffering for the rest of her life? What would an advanced soul do in such a situation?

I believed in everything in Ostad Elahi's teachings. I was just "in two minds" (Guinness, 1976, p. 17) because I did not understand the justifications behind the spiritual notion of forgiveness. To resolve my doubt, I decided to practice forgiveness in spite of all the bafflements. I did that because Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987; 1995) always advised his students to err on the side of caution when they were unsure. And as I did not know how to forgive, I decided to start practicing forgiveness by dismissing the idea of retaliation.

I never knew if I correctly practiced forgiveness or not. A few years after, I made an attempt to evaluate that exercise by listing the reasons that motivated me not to seek revenge at that time. Some of the items I wrote in the list were: I thought God did not want me to; I was too tired to try; I did not have the power to revenge the way I liked; and I thought revenge could invite even more exploitation in the future. In the list, I also referred to "reasons that I do not know yet" because it was in that period of my life that I had a glimpse of the vastness of my soul, tangibly experienced the fact that "we are only conscious of a minuscule part of the much larger spiritual process which is taking place in our spirit" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 113), and discovered how little did I know of my inner self.

Was I successful in my practice? Malik (2016), in her poetic book *Raw*, defines forgiveness as taking the knife out of your own back and not using it to hurt someone who had hurt you. With this definition, I might say that I could forgive. In an essay that discusses cognitive systems for revenge and forgiveness, McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2013) explain that when revenge is not taken because the victim is physically unable to revenge, then the victim has not really forgiven the transgressor. With this definition, I surely did not forgive. For my questions I never found an answer. The question mark is still in my book. The forgiveness practice was among those practices of mine that contributed to my growth only through increasing the number of questions in my mind.

The third question mark I discuss here is related to the concept of submitting to God's will. After some of my early efforts, when I was convinced that I was unable to change the situation, I decided to consider the practice of submission. By that time, I learned from Natural Spirituality that life was not about enjoying oneself; as Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1993a) stated, one should view this world "as a school for working towards perfection and gaining spiritual maturity" (p. 77). Thus, I set an exercise for myself to accept the situation as it was and use it to the best of my ability to gain spiritual maturity. I intended to practice "contentment in the general sense" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 92) – the first stage of submission in Natural Spirituality – by not complaining at all and being mentally content in the difficult situation with the help of self-suggestion and the power of my faith. The exercise was beautifully written and set, but it was too difficult to practice.

There is a kind of doubt – characterised by standing still – in which "people do not so much lose their faith as cease to use their faith" (Guinness, 1976, p. 111). I think I was affected by that kind of doubt back then. I did not lose my faith, but perhaps I was too tired to use it. Many days, when I was totally frustrated, I asked Ostad Elahi, in my mind, what he would do if he was in my shoes. Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987) explained about the pleasure truth seekers would find when they aligned their will to God's will. I could never find pleasure in my efforts to practice submission. I read the story of Job, the iconic image of a patient sufferer, whose faith helped him to submit to the righteousness of god in most unfortunate circumstances; but that did not help much. After all, I was not a saint nor a prophet. Last year, when I was reading an article (Joo, 2012) about Job and his integrity and how he did "not sin with lips" (p. 71) during his suffering, I remembered my submission practice again. Like Job, my lips were closed and I did not complain during my suffering; but unlike Job, I never gained consciousness about the reasons of my pain.

My practice of submission did not go as I planned. Although I never expressed dissatisfaction about my circumstances to anyone, I could not be the brave fighter I wanted to be. I turned to a passive and aimless person who was carried away by the current of life. Perhaps all I did was to hold myself together. Was I successful in my submission practice back then? The question is still in my mind, and the question mark is still in my book (B. Elahi, 2005) next to the topic of submission.

Being self-Othered. My first reaction to the new situation was that I tried to find reasons for what had happened. Practicing spiritual exercises in Natural Spirituality for more than 9 years, I had already learned that everything that happened to me happened for some reasons (B. Elahi, 1995) and had specific spiritual meanings (B. Elahi, 2005). Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1987) always advised his students to search for reasons within themselves in every happening; so I asked myself "Why did this happen to me?" The question was not posed in a way as if I was the innocent victim of circumstances, rather it searched for probable reasons behind the happening. In Ostad Elahi's philosophy (B. Elahi, 1993a), unpleasant events take place either as the consequence of one's preceding actions, so that one can atone for one's misdeeds, or as "an act of grace" (p. 115) in disguise for the good of that particular person. So, I needed to consider both possibilities. The situation could surely be a consequence of my preceding misdeeds. I had wronged people so many times in my life I could not even recall all of them. Of course my wrongdoings were not similar to what was done to me, but reading stories about Sufis and truth seekers in the past I knew that a spiritual punishment could appear in many unexpected forms. Nevertheless, the situation could as well be a blessing in disguise.

I remembered my piano teacher, an internationally known musician and a mystic who was also my life mentor, had told me several times metaphorically: "There is a wide river that truth seekers need to cross in order to reach the truth. Not everyone dares to cross the river. Many people live their life without even thinking about what is on the other side of the river. Crossing the river is difficult. For those who begin, there is no going back. They have no choice but to row the boat for the rest of their lives. However, sometimes they stand idle and stop rowing. This is when God sends difficulties. God arranges a difficult situation for the truth seekers to make them row the boat, and to fasten their progress." I thought that was what Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1993a) meant by mentioning "the act of grace."

I knew that because of my human limitations, I could never completely come to know the real reasons behind the unfortunate event. I could not know for certain if God had designated the event for my spiritual development or it was the result of my own previous wrong actions. My search to find reasons ended up to a long list whose items either referred to my past misdeeds or to things I could learn in the new situation. Considering God's justice and believing that whatever happened to me was ultimately good and just (B. Elahi, 1987), I tried to surrender to His will by telling myself that I certainly deserved to be in that situation. But in order to be motivated to move on, I dismissed the punishment aspect of the happening and tried to view the event more as a blessing in disguise and as an opportunity for my spiritual development. I told myself that the benevolent Creator designated that event for me to learn something and to progress faster (de Brivezac & Comte, 2007). However, even looking at the painful situation as a blessing did not help much to tolerate it, because I did not know how to live my life. Being surrendered and not complaining is one thing, and planning your next movement is another. I knew I had to row the boat, but I did not know how to do it.

Spiritual practices are usually conceptualised as solitary struggles. However, to set spiritual exercises I had sometimes consulted some of my friends and family members and they had helped me a great deal on details. They had advised me to work on some of my bad habits I had not noticed, and had reminded me of some situations that I had forgot to consider in my practices. Because confronting that particular situation left me tired and confused, I decided to get help and consult a few people around me. But consulting others in that period of my life proved to be a bad idea. Except a friend from the university who encouraged me to be brave, take risk and "swim against the current," all those I consulted advised me to follow the approved cultural norm, a norm that I despised. They asked me to patiently and passively wait until the situation changed. The worst thing was that those few people that I talked to, began to talk to other people; more and more people got involved in my problem and, without even being asked, they kept advising me the same disagreeable advice. It was the time that I started to hate everyone I knew, including myself. I hated myself the most because no matter how I disliked other people's ideas about remaining passive, I did not do anything against it.

The self-hatred gradually followed by self-contempt, self-anger, self-blame and a damaged self-esteem. I became more and more depressed as I could see my fear and my powerlessness; and then, as Cacciatore, Frøen, and Killian (2013) explain in their essay about self-blame and mental health, I condemned others and condemned myself at the same time for having failed to fight. Halliday, Boughton, and Kerridge (2014) define self-Other as "self-imposed sense of marginalisation and otherness" (p. 255). This was what I did. I distanced myself more and more from others until I almost stopped communicating with all those who knew my situation. I stopped answering calls, I did not go to family gatherings, I did not go out with my friends, and I asked everyone not to call on me for some time.

In a special process of self-Othering there is a curious strategy in which one first constructs an imaginative other and then tries to identify with it (Germana, 2010). That was also what I did. In my process of self-Othering I tried to detach myself from everything around me and identify with an imaginary rebellious sufferer. I wanted to re-evaluate my identity, and reappraise my sense of self and my expectations for the future. I worked hard in my imagination to clearly define the character I wanted to identify with, and I began to practice being her. But to do that, first I needed to clear up my surroundings and remove some people who damaged even the tiny results of my efforts.

Suffering can transform people's life, including how they understands themselves and their relationships. As a self-reflexive autoethnographer I now see that I tried self-marginalisation and self-Othering to protect myself from the harms of people around me. I regarded self-Othering as a spiritual practice because of two reasons. First, by self-Othering I was observing the rights of my body. In Natural Spirituality, students "have a duty to avoid anything that causes physical or psychological harm" (B. Elahi, 1997, p. 6) to themselves. Thus, I needed to remove those who distressed me by imposing their ideas on me and irritated me by feeling pity for me. The second reason was that I considered self-Othering as a necessary step toward making a new identity. To become the rebellious sufferer, I had to distance myself from all those who discouraged me in one way or another.

The project went well to some extent, at least in the beginning. My relationship with others was limited to those people who knew nothing about my problem, mostly in university and at work. I was practicing self-control by putting on a mask. This is a strategy that McCullough and Carter (2013) define as "suppressing one goal so as to pursue another one that is more highly valued" (p. 123). I suppressed my despairing feelings to be able to put the sad experience behind me and live a life as if nothing had happened.

I persisted in being isolated from my family and friends for almost a year. However, the process of self-Othering somehow intensified the emotional turmoil. I had to compromise the quality of my life and my general wellbeing. The practice of self-Othering proved to be a pointless effort. I neither could preserve my physical and psychological health, nor could I continue the act of identification to the extent I wished for. But that was not the worst part. Trying to identify with an imaginary Other – the brave and rebellious sufferer – I experienced a silent and internal loss of self. Not only was I confused about who I was, but I could not remember who I had been before.

Sorry dignified risk!

> Dear God … I know that anytime You allow pain to enter my life it is because You are preparing me for a major blessing. My heart and mind is open to receive whatever it is that You have for me in this next phase of my life. I stand ready to receive it and praise You in advance. (Crawley, 2014, p. 231)

Among the stories I have written in this thesis, this last one was the most difficult to write. Writing about answered prayers in the previous chapter, those experiences that unexpectedly ended with a miracle, reminded me of the happy days that I was protected by an invisible force. Even the first story in this chapter, eventually ended happily. Although the happy ending happened after a long time of unanswered prayers, the analysis of the story called up the good memories of my success. But it was strenuous to analyse this one, not only because I was reminded of the pain all the time, but mostly because I was ashamed of how I responded to the experience. I was ashamed that I could not take the dignified risk.

When I wanted to choose a second story for this chapter among my experiences of unanswered prayers, I put this experience as my last choice. This experience was unresolved; I could not clearly understand my feelings and reactions to the situation, and even after 12 years I did not know what God expected me to do. I even started to write the story of the day I lost my father. That was also a painful experience where my prayer was not answered the way I wished for and I had to submit. In that experience, I was still a courageous girl who endured the pain bravely, and was praised for managing life afterwards in spite of all the difficulties. But I soon changed my mind.

No matter how much I was reluctant to write about this experience, I chose it for two reasons. First, because this thesis was supposed to help me with a better self-knowledge. If I ever wanted to evaluate my practices in that period and come to a clearer understanding of the experience it was the time. The second reason was that I felt ethically obliged to write about that experience in this thesis. I felt this autoethnography should cover as many aspects of my spiritual practices as possible. That means I had to include an unresolved practice as well. I needed to write about questions for which I could never find answers, and write about a feature of my inner self of which I could not be proud. In this section, thus, I explain how the idea of a dignified risk came to my mind and how I reacted to the idea.

My understanding of submission to God by that time was to accept the situation without complaining and then actively try to find the right way to respond to the situation. I believed there was a right way specifically for me considering my specific personality and all the details of my life. I knew that the right way was not written in spiritual books because it only belonged to me. However, I thought that I could find the way if I could find the related spiritual rules in my books and localise it to my situation.

I tried to consider everything. I wrote down ideas that came to my mind and thought about the advantages and disadvantages of them; but things were complicated and no idea seemed a "good" idea. Ostad Elahi had once said "if we are mindful, we can always ascertain the rightness or wrongness of our course based on the signs that are usually present in the repercussions of our actions" (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 103). My understanding of the sentence was that I could actually know if I was doing the right thing or not if I was mindful enough and paid enough attention to the "immediate and delayed results" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 68) of my actions. However, all my efforts of being mindful, paying attention, recording the outcomes of my daily decisions, and evaluating the advantages and disadvantages could not lead me to a clear result.

In the new situation, I was in need of help to know what to do. I was starved for the traditional master-disciple relationship in which I could just do what my master would say. Unlike traditional spirituality and institutional religions where one can talk to a mentor or a priest, for example, to ask for advice in life situations, Natural Spirituality insisted that personal life decisions should be taken by the spiritual students themselves. However, I did not feel wise enough to find the right way.

Working on the list of ideas, I eventually narrowed down the possible long term responses to the event into two general items. I had to either conform to social norms and do nothing but wait, or be brave, take a dignified risk and begin swimming against the current. In shortlisting my choices I expended much effort to consider God's satisfaction and my human duties, including my duties towards myself. The dignified risk would make a huge change in my life style as part of the plan was moving to another city, and I had two big concerns: if I could observe the rights of others (B. Elahi, 2005), and if I had the necessary power to do so.

It was not the first time I could not find the right thing to do in my life, but never was I so helpless. I was struggling with myself and my feelings on how to do life for nearly five months when I decided to let go of the dignified risk. Concerning the right of others, I was only worried about my six-year-old daughter who had just started school and needed a peaceful environment to cope with the new challenges of her life. It was surely not a good idea to take her with me to another city in which everything would be uncertain. It was not a good idea either to leave her behind because I did not want her to feel abandoned. I had a feeling that she needed me and my help for the new challenges of her life. On 6 March 2006, when I was writing about my concerns in my diary, I wrote "Being a mother is indeed a curious thing. You cannot even do *the right thing* when you are a mother." Nevertheless, I need to confess here that it was not the concerns for my daughter that prevented me from taking the dignified risk. I made my choice due to a number of other reasons that mostly were related to my fears and feelings of powerlessness.

In the prayer experience above, I had already decided to let go of the dignified risk and I was suffering emotionally for letting it go. I felt guilty and unworthy because I could not be brave enough. Feeling the warmth around me made me so happy because I thought God was understandingly telling me "I saw your efforts and I know your pain. That is enough. Come along with me!" And when I realised God was not taking me with Him, I felt left alone. And it was then that the idea of committing suicide came to my mind.

Suicide came to my mind because I was really tired. I wanted the situation to come to an end as quickly as possible. But I quickly dismissed the idea. Suicide in Natural Spirituality is "among the unpardonable sins" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 96), and it is not even a way of escaping from pain. In order to expand on this I quote Ostad Elahi's (B. Elahi, 1993a) prohibition against self-harm at length:

> Whatever the reason for a particular suicide, the soul of that person suddenly leaves their body without any preparation, and above all without permission. Since it is not expected in the other world, it wanders around like someone lost, without any goal, help or guide, for a longer or shorter period – sometimes for many long years. Now throughout this period that soul continues to feel the pain and suffering that it had hoped to escape through suicide, as well as the sufferings of death. For example, if a person has hung himself in order to escape from some great dishonour, bankruptcy, public humiliation, or grief, then for a long time that soul will feel the horrible, nightmarish sensation of being strangled to death, along with all the suffering and agony that brought them to suicide. At the end of that period of torment, which has no redeeming value, that person is then brought to judgement so that they can hear and undergo the actual corresponding punishment that will also be imposed. (p. 96)

The motivation for committing suicide was so much that I started telling myself that the above extract might come with some exceptions. God knew how difficult it was for me. But the explanations did not make room for any exceptions. I read it several times. The image was horrifying. It was not worth the risk and the risk was not even dignified. I chose "the prudent course" (B. Elahi, 1993a, p. 97) and gave the idea away.

I know the reader wants to know the end of the story. But there was no ending for that story. I chose the less heroic choice, the one that was easier to do. I did not seek vengeance. I did not move to another city. I did what culture wanted me to do: I did nothing. To this day, I still do not know if God is content with my choice. In Natural Spirituality, spiritual students are obliged to strive to practice ethical principles "to the extent that their power of understanding and their bodily strength allow – without anguish, unnecessary difficulty, or unbearably painful impositions" (N. Elahi, 2007, p. 65), and I, rightly or wrongly, estimated that taking the dignified risk would be beyond my strength.

I surely learned many things about my self during the period of suffering and could accordingly make some positive changes in some aspects of my life due to the knowledge I gained, but the pain was so great that it overshadowed the lessons for a long time. Burchell (2009), influenced by Foucault, maintains that resisting cultural norms might cause a variety of harmful effects to the body, including fatigue, injury, and breakdown. That was true in my case. Because of my struggles I lost 11 kilograms in one year, suffered from some skin problems, and experienced extreme psychological fatigue. With dismissing the idea of suicide and choosing to "live for God" I lost my last resort and was drowned in my suffering. It took me very long to regain my sense of self. I did not even know when the situation came to an end. I had been feeling wrong for so long that I forgot what feeling right meant. I still think that the only thing that helped me to survive that situation without falling apart was "the sustaining power of spirituality in my life" (hooks, 2003, p. 181) and the sense of meaning it gave me.

I began this section with a quote from Crawley's (2014) autoethnography of survival. In his article, he shared some of his experiences as a Christian African American male cancer survivor to illustrate "how survivorship and faith are inextricably connected" (p. 224). Crawley's (2014) writing reminded me that I could look at my own experience from a different perspective. For the first time, I thought that in my evaluation of the experience I had given more weight to the hardship of the event and underestimated its impact on my process of spiritual perfection. Perhaps that period of my life was a time to wait or "a time to weep" (Ecclesiastes 3:4, New International Version); maybe that hardship was necessary for me to grow stronger or kinder; and perhaps God had never left me alone. The analysis of the experience will not surely end in this chapter, as I will always be "in search of [His] essence and lessons in this experience" (Crawley, 2014, p. 231) for the rest of my life.

Conclusion

Spirituality is associated with private and personal aspects of one's life. However, the impacts of one's spirituality on his or her social life is undeniable. Researchers maintain that one's spirituality is closely connected to one's cultural identity (Tisdell, 2006), and shapes one's public self (Chang, 2011). Perhaps because Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 1999) always insisted on practicing Natural Spirituality in the midst of society and within the framework of an active social life, the impact of my spiritual practices on my social life is better highlighted.

The autoethnographic analysis of my prayer experiences, in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, showed that my spirituality both impacted and was influenced by my social life. Being engaged with Natural Spirituality affected my social life when my practices changed the course of my life, when my faith encouraged me to take necessary risks, and when my doubt challenged me to persist. My social life affected my spirituality when I needed to redefine my duties to others, when I had to modify a spiritual practice to fit into my life schedule, and when other people's ideas clashed with mine.

In Chapter 3, I defined spirituality as an educational process through which I could educate my thought and move toward self-knowledge. The analysis of some of my prayer experiences illustrated how each practice helped me move a few steps forward toward my goal. Every time I doubted, new questions came to my mind and demanded I better educate my thought. With the new questions I needed to search, not only to find a theoretical answer but to discover how practically a spiritual law should be practiced in particular personal situations. In my relationship with others, I learned that apparently opposite characteristics live side by side in me; and with every risk I took – or did not take – I acquired more knowledge about my capabilities and my limitations.

An autoethnography can help researchers to see how "their present thoughts and behaviours are rooted in past events" (Chang, 2008, p. 134). My autoethnography also illustrated how my present thoughts and behaviours are connected to my spiritual practices in the past. The analysis of the shared experiences clearly shows how the epiphanies affected my view of the world and how I modified my reactions accordingly later in life.

An autoethnography is also "a way of coming to know an experience better or differently" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 68). This autoethnography began with reviewing my journal entries and selecting some epiphanies through an analytical process. I then rewrote the epiphanies in the form of stories and provided some background in order for the stories to make sense. However, it was in the analysis of the common themes in the stories – when I connected my stories to the experiences of other researchers and highlighted the cultural aspects of each experience – that I could come to know them differently. With the autoethnographic analysis of my prayer experiences, new meanings were created and some hitherto hidden aspects of them were revealed. A different understanding of the experiences then led to a better understanding of my self.

Ostad Elahi's scientific approach to spirituality demands constant analysis and evaluation of students' practices (B. Elahi, 1999). This autoethnography, thus far, has been the deepest analysis I have done on my spiritual practices. What I leaned from this research – about my intentions and motivations – was beyond my expectation. It is my plan to continue analysing my spiritual practices with this approach. This is just the beginning of my spiritual autoethnographies.

Chapter 8 – Conclusion

> [Ostad Elahi:] Delve within until you find the Source, for to know the Source one must first know oneself. (B. Elahi, 2005, p. 209)

This thesis has been one of the most fruitful practices in my quest for self-knowledge and divine knowledge. It was an autoethnographic analysis of some of my spiritual experiences in the framework of Ostad Elahi's philosophy of Natural Spiritualty. The thesis studied Natural Spirituality as an educational process and explored the influence of Ostad Elahi's philosophy on my life and my identity. The aim of this research was to trace the changes that have happened in my behaviour and in perceiving the world, while I was systematically practicing ethics following the principles of Natural Spirituality. To fulfil this aim, I shared and analysed some of my practices of prayer-attention in different situations and analysed my efforts to resolve the vulnerability in my faith, my resilience in instances where I was Othered, and my courage to take dignified risks (or my timidity not to take one).

In this chapter, first I summarise the thesis by reviewing all the chapters, referring to their key points. In the second section, I explain how my analysis responded to research questions. In the third section of the chapter, I identify implications, explain the transformative power of autoethnography and the contribution of the thesis to knowledge. In the final section of the chapter, I provide some recommendations for further research and discuss my final thoughts.

Review of the Thesis – How the Chapters Took Shape

This thesis began with an introductory chapter to provide the necessary background and discuss the aim and objectives of the thesis. I discussed the theoretical framework, literature review and methodology, each in a separate chapter. I presented and analysed data in three discussion chapters beginning with a prologue. And here I end the thesis with a concluding chapter in which I summarise the thesis, respond to research questions, and identify its implications and contribution. In the following section, I summarise Chapters 1 to 7 and explain how each chapter took shape.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

This thesis began with discussions of my cultural and spiritual background and how it influenced my ways of thinking and my contentions. I explained my own observations of the situation of religion and spirituality in Iran since I was a child, and wrote in detail how my worldviews changed when I grew from being an anti-religious person to a spiritual one. I also explained how this research helped me explore my spiritual personality and see new features of my inner self where spirituality and culture were entwined.

In another section of Chapter 1, I made clear how the scope of the study changed from an investigation on Natural Spirituality as a possible part of children's education to an autoethnography. I wrote how I realised that any investigation of the possibility of using Natural Spirituality in Australian education needed to be postponed until I methodically analysed my own experiences and better understood how Natural Spirituality educated me and affected my life. I then explained how my autoethnography can change the world, even if it was only by a millimetre.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

I was investigating the educational impacts of Natural Spirituality on my behaviour and worldview in the theoretical framework of Ostad Elahi's philosophy. Thus, I dedicated Chapter 2 to discuss Ostad Elahi's philosophy. As Ostad Elahi's life had great influence on shaping his philosophy, I began the chapter with overviewing his life and work. In that section I explained how Ostad Elahi spent the first third of his life in complete seclusion from the world, fasting and praying like the traditional mystics. I also discussed how he decided to leave his followers who held him in high esteem and his peaceful angelic life in village, and embraced a judicial career to build upon his spiritual experiences and put his ethical principles to the test in the midst of society. By making this decision, Ostad Elahi not only changed his own life style but also made a radical transformation to the classical form of spirituality. He exchanged the traditional master-disciple relationship – which was based on blind obedience of the disciple – to a teacher-student relationship where students obtained their spiritual knowledge through rational explanations, and personal experiments. In this new form of spirituality students were supposed to travel their journey toward self-knowledge by improving their discernment and deciding for themselves how to react in difficult situations in their lives. This aspect of Natural Spirituality was illustrated in the analysis of my stories where I was searching for the right thing to do.

In the next sections of the chapter, I introduced vocabularies that I utilised while I was analysing my experiences (the fifth step of analysis – Theorising) to combine the language of the theory with my language of analysis. Thus, expressions like imperious self, in vivo practice, spiritual understanding and education of thought were discussed while I was explaining about important aspects of Ostad Elahi's philosophy.

Chapter 3 – Literature Review

I began the review of literature by comparing some contemporary definitions of spirituality. I needed to examine different definitions in order to properly build my own working definition for spirituality. In the comparison, I divided definitions into three groups: those that concentrated on moral aspect of spirituality, those that emphasised the aspects of connectedness and meaning-making, and those that look at spirituality as the experience of the transcendent. I then explained that although spirituality for me had all these meanings, my working definition of spirituality focuses on its educational aspect: like a university where the students learn to develop divine principles in themselves, educate their thought by critical thinking, and are evaluated based on their intentions while making decisions and their efforts in fighting the imperious self.

In another section of Chapter 3, I gave a general review of spirituality in Australia, from Indigenous spirituality to the current situation of spirituality in the country and its secular education. I explained that the review was necessary because Australia partly gave context to my research and, as an autoethnographer, I needed to explore and understand the new place I am living in; a place that has given me a safe space to research spirituality.

I continued the chapter with reviewing the literature on three key concepts in spirituality that were used in the analysis of my experiences: mysticism, prayer, and faith / doubt. I wrote that section parallel to the structure of Chapter 2, where I discussed these concepts based on Ostad Elahi's teachings and thoughts. Then, I examined the literature on spirituality and narrative, specifically spiritual autoethnographies, and explained how narrative methodologies had become a popular approach in analysing spiritual experiences and how this thesis could enrich the existing research.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

The methodology chapter focused on specific methods used to conduct this research. In this chapter, first I discussed autoethnography as qualitative method (Chang, 2011) and made a collage of its different definitions, proposed by known autoethnographers, to build my own working definition for the term. My personal definition of autoethnography became a self-reflective narrative method that wandered in my memories, placed my spiritual self in various social and cultural contexts, and helped me search for meanings of self in each context. I also explained that I considered autoethnography as an educational process and a continuous learning experience that helped me discover some hidden features of my experiences and get better knowledge of my psychospiritual self.

The next section of the chapter was about my data generation methods. I explained the importance of in vivo practice of ethical principles in Natural Spirituality and the techniques I used to practice these principles. Writing that part was necessary because all of the experiences I analysed in discussion chapters were built upon those techniques. As the stories were mostly about my prayer experiences, in explaining the techniques of data collection I mostly focused on my prayer exercises. Then, I wrote about the process of data selection and explained how I chose the epiphanies that led to some inner transformation.

In the section of data analysis, I discussed six steps of analysis, inspired by Ellis' (2004) thematic analysis of narrative. I explained how, in the analysis, I created themes, connected with other researchers, highlighted the cultural aspects of the experiences, illustrated their transformative aspects, combined the language of theory with my language of analysis, and used reflexivity. The chapter ended with discussions on evaluating autoethnography and some ethical issues.

Chapter 5 – An Epiphany

As the first discussion chapter in this thesis, Chapter 5 is the foundation of my analysis. The first draft of this chapter, which was prepared for my Progress Review, was where the steps of analysis came to shape. I wrote an abbreviated account of an epiphany, a prayer experience I had in a Catholic church when I was living in Spain, and used it as the general frame of reference for the analysis. Then, I searched my diaries and collected all my later reflections on that experience. Contemplating and sorting how the experience affected my thoughts, feelings, intentions and decisions in different situations later in my life, the three themes were developed: faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk.

In the final version of the chapter, which now is a part of this thesis, I added a section on my personal understanding of the exercises of prayer-attention in Natural Spirituality and discussed the effect of my past cultural experiences on my ability to pray. I also wrote separate sections for each theme to explain how they came to exist, what meanings they created within the experience, and how they were related to my path of self-knowledge. These parts provided the required personal details for making the analysis more reader friendly. They were also necessary as a background for the autoethnographic analysis as I revisited the themes and used them as analytical devices for the analysis of my stories in Chapters 6 and 7.

In the last part of the chapter, the autoethnographic analysis, I analysed samples of my thoughts (B. Elahi, 2001) to explore various meanings of the experience and uncover the modifications in my beliefs and behaviour. In my analysis I used other texts from my personal experiences – a novel, a movie, and a friend's personal experience – to elaborate on the life-changing features of the story.

Chapter 6 – Answered Prayers

Most of the prayer experiences that I selected to analyse in this thesis had two characteristics. First, I could detect that the three themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risk repeatedly appeared in them. Second, they were all epiphanies that not only brought me exceptional realisations and new awareness about my inner self (see pp. 104-106), but also were followed by a miracle. They were prayers that were answered, each in a different way. Thus, I named the chapter "answered prayers" and began my discussions with a section on the notion of miracle and my personal understanding of the elements of a miraculous event. In that section, with the help of a story in Proust's (2002) novel, I defined miracle as an unlikely, unexpected, and astonishing event that was greater than anything one could even dream for and was brought about after some resistance and persistence.

In writing my personal stories in this chapter, I engaged with three states of self (Munro, 2011). I was a narrator who remembered the events and told the stories, I was the protagonist who had experienced the events, and I was the author who made the narrative. Then, in the analysis of my experiences, I found a fourth state of self: an autoethnographer who scrutinised the experiences, constantly looked backwards to clear out ambiguous things, examined the actions and intentions of the protagonist self, and found meanings and relations. My autoethnographer self systematically analysed the contents of prayers, the words I used to pray, the reasons for my praying, and the context in which I prayed, and helped me find many hidden aspects of my inner self. Concerning my spiritual self, I learned about the nature of and modifications in my faith in different periods of my life. Concerning my cultural self, I gained knowledge about the changes in behaviours and motivations as an immigrant, a mother, and a researcher in a new country.

Chapter 7 – Unanswered Prayers

In order for my autoethnographic research to be comprehensive, I also needed to analyse some of my prayers experiences that did not lead to miracles. This was important because I wanted readers to know that many of my prayer experiences remained open-ended and unanswered for a long time, sometimes forever. Those experiences were specifically significant among my spiritual exercises because they brought the most difficult questions to my mind, and I wanted to analyse my reactions to confusing situations. However, the stories were the most difficult to write.

The two experiences I chose to analyse were different in nature. The first one, with all its doubts and puzzling questions, remained unanswered only for seven years. After one year studying for my master's degree, I was almost certain that I made a good choice to persist and that my personalised God was happy about my decision and was supporting me in the challenges of my mother-student life. The second experience, however, has remained unanswered until today, 12 years after the experience. I still do not know if I made a good choice or a bad choice; I do not know if God was happy with my decision then or was disappointed in me and my cowardice; and I do not know why he did not take me with Him that day. Writing about that period of my life was so difficult that I kept postponing it. Several times I decided to change the story and write about another experience. But I felt a need to know what happened to me then and I forced myself to write about it.

The result was beyond my expectations. Many ambiguous parts of my experience – my motivations, intentions, thoughts, and fears – became much more understandable to me. However, the analysis of the second story was followed by a clear awareness of the vastness of my soul and how little I know about my psychospiritual self.

Response to Research Questions

In this research, I used Ostad Elahi's philosophy of Natural Spirituality as my theoretical framework to analyse some of my spiritual practices of prayer-attention where I was deeply connected with the Source, and to investigate their educational effects on me. The main research question addressed by the thesis asked: How has practicing Natural Spirituality educated me and changed my reactions and behaviour? In this section, I draw upon the analysis in discussion chapters to answer this question.

As I explained in Chapter 1, the main goal of practicing ethical principles in Natural Spirituality is gaining self-knowledge; and to delve within to obtain self-knowledge, spiritual students not only need to practice ethical principles but are also obliged to constantly assess themselves through careful observation and analysis of their inner self. Through the systematic practices (explained in Chapter 4 – data generation methods) and writing about my experiences in my diaries, I could gradually know more about both my positive attributes and my weak points. I considered my resources, my abilities, and my limits, to adjust the spiritual theories with my personal life. Sometimes questions came to my mind when I did not know what my duty was. Sometimes I became confused as I did not know what the best way was to perform my human duty. But generally I could look at situations with a wider perspective and made better decisions.

The more I learned about my inner self, the more I became tolerant toward others, and the more I modified my behaviour and reactions to be kind to them. I learned to better evaluate my relationships with people around me, remain mindful of their goodness, strive to reciprocate their kindness, and took more responsibility when something went wrong – looking within to find reasons.

Although the changes in my behaviour have been remarkable, I know that I am still at the beginning of the path of perfection. According to Ostad Elahi (B. Elahi, 2009), the most significant change that takes place in spiritual students during their progression is that they feel a natural aversion toward all malevolent acts. To reach that goal I have a long way to go, as I often detect desires in myself to act in favour of my imperious self. However, the analysis of my experiences in this thesis showed with clarity that I have moved on the path a few steps forward.

The analysis in the research also addressed the sub-questions. It illustrated what new challenges have entered my life since I started to engage with Natural Spirituality. All the daily thoughts and concerns about my human duties and living ethically rushed to my life with my engagement with Natural Spirituality. The analysis also showed how living in different cultural environments affected my spiritual practices. Although practicing ethical principles is mostly done inwardly, every new cultural milieu demanded new considerations and new forms of practices. I also made changes to my practices as I gained new identities, like for example as a mother or a university student.

The research also threw light on the flexibility of exercises in Natural Spirituality. Bahram Elahi, in most of his publications (B. Elahi, 1997; 1999; 2001; 2005), confidently stated that Natural Spirituality could be adopted by people of all religions and cultures and could perfectly fit within the framework of a modern active social life. The analysis of some of my personal experiences proved this statement right. No matter where I was – in Iran, Spain or the United States, among my family, friends, or classmates – I could find a way to practice an ethical principle if I really wanted to. New cultures only affected the way of practice not the nature of it.

Last but not least, the analysis in this research illustrated how Natural Spirituality helped me with the challenges of life. This mostly happened by the sense of meaning spirituality had given to my life: the idea that my existence had a purpose and everything happened for a reason. Ever since I was involved with spirituality every challenge in life appeared to me as a test that I needed to pass by choosing the right reaction to it in order to progress on my path to perfection. Natural Spirituality taught me to become more resilient in order to be able to cope in new cultural environments and situations. The new cultural situations were not only limited to moving to new countries, but sometimes in my home country of Iran I was confronted with a new cultural challenge as I obtained new identities, like becoming a sick child's mother in a treatment centre. The analysis in this study helped me to investigate my reflections, see how my contrary feelings were created, and how Natural Spirituality eased my way in dealing with the challenges of life.

Writing about the helping aspect of Natural Spiritualty, I need to mention one more discovery I made in this study. Through the process of reading my diaries to select data, narrative writings and the autoethnographic analysis, I discovered a trace of God's presence in every achievement I made in my quest of self-knowledge. As I reviewed my spiritual experiences and my later reflections of them and during the time I wrote stories about them, I constantly stopped, astounded to see that He was there too. I noticed the footprints of my invisible compassionate companion, both in times of happiness and in times of distress, and realised that without His help and support I could not move forward in developing self-awareness. In fact, in many situations where I asked God to change things and I did not receive a tangible answer, I found how He changed me, helped me to know my weaknesses and change my behaviour, to be able to change things myself.

Limitations

One limiting aspect of this study is its self-consciously cultural and thematic perspective. I chose to discuss and analyse my spiritual experiences by exploring the themes of faith / doubt, being Othered, and dignified risks, in the light of my personal cultural background. There is potential for many more perspectives in exploring practicing ethical exercises that can greatly add to the richness of the literature about Natural Spirituality in particular, and spirituality and autoethnography in general. As another limitation, the reader of this autoethnography will also be aware from the beginning that it is an account written by a believer, rather than a critique of Ostad Elahi's spiritual work.

Other limitations in this research are related to both the vastness and the ambiguous features of the subject of spirituality. In fact, the domain of spirituality is so vast that any analysis of spiritual experiences seems inadequate. When researching spirituality, it becomes obvious that many more philosophical ideas – ancient, modern, and postmodern – could be considered and events could be interpreted from various perspectives.

Implications of the Research

Thomas Keneally (Roberts, Mitchell, & Zubrinich, 2002), a prominent Australian novelist, playwright, and essayist, once said: "You can only write a book if you're under the illusion that the world needs this novel, and that no-one has quite written this novel before. You need that degree of obsession to get the thing written" (p. 143). I think this is also true about doing research. You can only write a thesis if you are under the illusion that the world needs it, and nobody has written it yet. At least that was what I thought when I started writing this thesis.

Ostad Elahi and Natural Spirituality are new to the field of spirituality, especially in a Western context. This research not only has been a self-knowledge quest and a life-changing process, but it also introduced a new philosophy to spirituality research in Australia. I identify implications of this research for autoethnographers, spiritual believers, religious people, and future spiritual researchers in two separate sections below where I discuss the transformative power of autoethnography and the thesis' contribution to knowledge.

Transformative Power of Autoethnography

This thesis focused on personal spiritual experiences in a self-directed educational setting. It was a spiritual autoethnography that analysed my prayer experiences in the light of my cultural background and investigated how I developed a better self-awareness (Wright, 2000) by practicing ethical practices in the framework of Natural Spirituality, and how my behaviour changed accordingly. Autoethnography was the best method I could choose for my research because it is a methodology that has the potential to provide researchers with "development, expansive learning, and transformation because they combine the processes of learning and meta-learning (learning about context), which make higher forms of knowledge possible" (Roth, 2005, pp. 123-124). This quote describes the progress of my reflexive research: as both the subject and the object of my study, I used writing as a process of discovery (Richardson, 2000) and learned about many hidden aspects of my self; and as I was prepared to be changed by my research, I transformed. Every time I wrote about my past self, I found out something new (Ellis, 2004), and writing about each experience moved me to another level of consciousness.

In the process of data analysis, I could tangibly see the uniqueness of my protagonist self (see p. 143). I could see that there were so many factors specific to my situations that it was inappropriate to render any other person's sense of the ideal self for determining my duties (Johnson, 2012). I gained more self-confidence in my personal way of spirituality in general and in communicating with God in particular. I became a better critical thinker in evaluating situations and re-evaluating meanings and relations (Webster, 2009). And, I found the courage to write about what disturbed me, what I feared, and what I had not been willing to speak about.

The implications of this research for spiritual believers and religious people are to grow the self-confidence in their personal ways of spirituality, and to develop critical thinking in their evaluations. This study suggests that spiritual people consider their uniqueness and believe that they are the best people to judge their own situation and decide on the most appropriate reaction. At the same time, they should make efforts to critically think about their and others' ideas, and be ready to re-evaluate meanings and relations through constantly questioning and experimenting with them.

The implications of this research for future spiritual researchers are to regard autoethnography as a possible methodology, believe in the power of sharing stories, and write about their challenges of being spiritually Othered, as so much is still silenced. With significant exceptions (Chang & Boyd, 2011), spirituality is rarely articulated in autoethnographies, and the field of spirituality research is in need of hearing different voices. I hope my reflections in this study can encourage more autoethnographies in the discipline of spirituality and self-exploration. One of my aims in this study was to be informative and non-judgmental of others. I hope that presenting my experiences will contribute to the creation of a safe space for different spiritual beliefs and practices.

Contribution to Knowledge

One of the ways this autoethnography makes contributions to existing research is by critiquing current conceptualisations of spirituality, introducing a systematic way for practicing of ethics, and asking questions that can be explored in future projects (Holman Jones, et al., 2015b). In this section, I discuss critiquing current conceptualisations of spirituality and the related implications of this research for spiritual researchers.

Spirituality is sometimes seen as a challenge to Western scientific thinking (Bone, 2007). This research argues that this idea might change by looking at spirituality as an experimental science and a medicine of the soul (B. Elahi, 1999; 2001). Natural Spirituality has a scientific approach to the nature of the spiritual self (B. Elahi, 1997), and Ostad Elahi's followers need to develop the mindset of a student or a researcher in their experimentations of spiritual laws. In his book, *Spirituality is a science*, Bahram Elahi (1999) compares the current status of the science of spirituality to the status of material science a few centuries ago. He gives an example of Galileo who could enhance the efficiency of the telescope and made some astronomical discoveries. As Galileo's publications on his new discoveries came under severe attacks, he decided to arrange meetings with some other scientists to give them an opportunity to look through the telescope and witness his discoveries by themselves. To his surprise these meetings turned out to be a failure because the scientists either did not accept to look into the telescope or failed to understand what they saw. Only Kepler, who had enough knowledge of the optical principles behind the telescope's design was convinced that Galileo's propositions were correct, even without looking through the telescope. According to B. Elahi (1999), spirituality, the same way, is not taken seriously in universities because there is not enough knowledge about authentic spirituality.

Unlike material science that is taught in recognised institutions in society, spirituality has not yet gained recognition as an educational process and is sometimes silenced in secular academy (Chang, 2011). Thus, one of the implications of this research for spiritual researchers is that they take into account the rigorous character of spirituality, share their experiences of experimenting with spiritual laws in the form of academic research, and help spirituality find its respected place in educational research.

This research adds to the existing spiritual research through elaboration on the use of spiritualty as a form of education of thought. It has been a valid search for how to get a better knowledge of self and how to live a better life, from the perspective of a participant-researcher with a belief system not much known in Western countries. The study is an autoethnography that studies the researcher as an Other from a different place and a different religion. Specifically, it introduces a spirituality inspired by poetic texts of Sufism and Islamic mysticism. This thesis also aimed to contribute by trying to understand the Other from a different perspective (Roberts, 2013). The more one knows about oneself, the more one becomes capable of understanding other people and the necessary balance in striving justice for both self and others (El Fadl, 2014). Thus, as another implication of research, the thesis encourages research on spiritual experiences in a variety of settings that can enhance pedagogical practices that are involved with diversity in education, for example in human rights education where teachers teach students to unmask and challenge oppression (Heggart, 2012).

Another contribution of my research lies in its transferability and applicability. Although my autoethnography is focused on the experiences of one sample, myself, the concepts, explanations and contextualised findings are potentially transferable to other settings (Pearson, Parkin, & Coomber, 2011).

The study design and methods also can be adapted to new settings (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013) and thus are applicable to other research with different frameworks in the field of spirituality. Conducting this research has been extremely valuable in my journey of self-knowledge. I hope the analysis of my spiritual experiences also influences other spiritual researchers and spiritual travellers in their own journey of self-knowledge, and this study gives motivation to more spiritual research in different places and with different perspectives.

Recommendations for Further Research

Spiritual travellers have long searched their souls to experience God (Landolt, 2006) and many mystics throughout history have shared their spiritual journeys in their memoirs, stories and poems (Ashton & Denton, 2006). These stories and poems have influenced many truth seekers and, for those who are on their quest of self-knowledge, have significant awakening messages. However, they are mostly far from being a methodical research. Mystics' stories, though they may permeate the heart of readers, lack the methodical analysis that is necessary to give authority to discussions of spirituality in universities.

Distinct from mystic's narratives about their personal experiences, this research is so far as can be ascertained, the only autoethnography on personal experiences in the framework of Natural Spirituality in existing literature. As the publications on Ostad Elahi's philosophy mostly discuss the philosophical aspects of Ostad Elahi's thoughts and teachings (Anvar, 2012; E. During, 2011; Morris, 2007) or explore the mystical features of his music (J. During, 2003), the need for analysis of personal experiences of those who practically apply Ostad Elahi's philosophy is perceived in the field.

My autoethnography focused on the practices of prayer-attention. This study recommends other followers of Ostad Elahi's philosophy to do and share their autoethnographies on different spiritual exercises and practicing various ethical principles.

In my thesis, I described a system of upbringing that is very distinctive from the systems used in most Western countries. I illustrated a different relationship with authority, for example, when (in Chapter 6 – story number 3) I explained my behaviour in the therapist's office, accepting his quick diagnosis without daring to ask for more explanations. This is something future researchers can be aware of.

This study explicitly connects different cultural pathways by exploring my behaviour not only as a follower of Ostad Elahi, but as an Iranian woman, a mother, a student, and an immigrant. The study, thus, encourages a diversity of views to come forward. It inspires, for example, those who are researching with children to understand that children's very different backgrounds and values will permeate their responses.

Spirituality *can* be researched, and every piece of research makes it more possible. What I have written is one account of a part of a specific spiritual journey; and I was fortunate to find a safe place where I could critically think about and question ideas, and write about my own ideology without fear. There is an increasing number of researchers who believe in the power of story and see that sharing beliefs in the form of narrative has the capability to cultivate social change (Adams, et al., 2015). The more researchers contribute to the field of spirituality, the safer spiritual believers will feel to share their experiences, and the more universities will include and accept research on spiritualty.

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