DEVELOPMENTAL METAMORPHOSES
AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PHENOMENON OF EPIPHANY

by

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ABSTRACT

Learning through epiphanies, especially those not born out of dire crises, can be exciting, hugely satisfying, and life-validating ways to augment the significance of a lesson. In a moment of clarity, they have the ability to transform knowledge into wisdom, to provide a sense of interconnectedness within the grander scheme, and to contribute instant resolutions to persistent dilemmas seemingly irresolvable by less extraordinary means. This study involves a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation of epiphanies as they occur in lived experience. Its primary goal was to address the question, “What does it mean to have an epiphany?” Using data collected from 16 first-person, retroactive accounts of the experience, an analysis strategy using six spectra of contrasting dimensions was used to highlight the importance of the interplay between various characteristics of epiphanies. A significant finding of the study is that there is no such thing as an archetypical epiphany. Nevertheless, we can still recognize the phenomenon as a coherent entity mainly because there is agreement about many of its characteristics in the moment that it happens. Having an epiphany involves inductively rearranging patterns of deductively organized information with personally, and sometimes universally significant results. These may include dramatic shifts of perspectives, impulses that lead us to action on important matters, and occasionally whole-scale transformations of identity. Enhancing formal education settings to facilitate the experience can renew one's passion for learning by making lessons more personally meaningful. In order to reap the benefits of the experience, we must hold space for the creative and introspective pursuits that allow them to happen. However, a challenge for facilitators of epiphanies involves learning how to direct the result of an epiphany to an intended outcome, such as a curricular goal.
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For teaching me how to be still and let things unfold as they will.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The usual way that humans grow, mature and ultimately transform intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually is by small and gradual steps. Lessons learned in formal and informal contexts are processed, and then absorbed into our understanding of the world. The acquisition and interpretation of packets of knowledge and experience collected over time are assimilated to construct our identities (Miller, 2004). Our identities influence our thinking and behaviour, inform our actions, and shape our frame of reference for interacting within a socio-cultural context. But in certain circumstances, such as when one falls in love, or when one experiences the death of someone close, we can be struck with sudden and unpredictable revelations that convey such profound meaning and insight about some facet of life that they shake the foundation of the schema that we have built to interpret it. The resulting feeling of inner chaos that arises from the perception that the experience cannot be adequately interpreted by rational means alone can precede a sudden and surprising confluence of seemingly disparate emotions, experiences, and thoughts that somehow converge to abruptly resolve the crisis in a deeply meaningful way (Erikson, 1968). Occasionally, permanent shifts in perspective or even whole-scale transformations of identity may occur. These instances have been called epiphanies, quantum changes, transformations, vital moments, and peak-experiences as well as a host of other related terms.

This research involved an investigation into the nature of such phenomena. The intent of the thesis was to provide a better understanding of what these momentous events are and to distinguish them from more traditional ways of learning. When life-enhancing
understandings are reached through singular life-changing moments, perhaps the wisdom gained from such events can be of benefit to others. Towards this end, this thesis describes some of the circumstances that trigger epiphanies and portrays, via sixteen examples of the phenomenon, what it means to have an epiphany, and what the outcome of such an event may be. Although epiphany stories are abundant in literary and cinematic contexts, and there have been many empirical investigations of the phenomenon as it occurs in lived experience, its essence remains unclear. Therefore, via descriptions and analyses of how people experience and assign meaning to epiphanies, it is hoped that this study will enhance our understanding of them, and contribute to the on-going investigation of the potential applications of these types of stochastic life episodes to the field of education.

My interest in the topic was spawned by a love for wilderness travel. I know intuitively that there is something about the context of wilderness, particularly when combined with a physical challenge that has an uncertain outcome such as canoeing, hiking, or back-country skiing that can put me into a state of extraordinary cognitive openness where profound insights sometimes occur. So, as a secondary school phys-ed teacher and an outdoor enthusiast, I became interested in studying the relationship of the perception of risk to learning in the context of outdoor education. The phenomenon that I originally sought to explore was called *edge learning* (Raffan, 2002). What I have come to understand since is that the type of insights gained from peak experiences that occur from learning at the edge of one’s comfort zone are neither exclusive to a wilderness setting nor require the perception of risk. They are part of a larger, more fascinating phenomenon, namely that of epiphany. As a result, the question that the following research addresses is this: What does it mean to have an epiphany?
The following five chapters outline the research in greater detail. In the first chapter, a review of related literature is presented. In the second, the methodology that was used to conduct the study is described. The third chapter presents the findings through verbatim excerpts from participant testimonies. The fourth chapter provides a dimensional analysis of various aspects of the phenomenon to illustrate that epiphanies are not one thing but many. In the final chapter, some of my thoughts about what it was like to conduct the research are conveyed, important findings are reviewed, implications for the field of education are outlined, and some directions for future research are suggested.

**A Review of Related Literature**

That epiphany could be a path to truth, or at least a valuable experience that generates life-affirming feelings that add meaning and purpose to one’s relationships with the world, is a theme that appeals to me on many levels. On one level, the notion that one can gain instant wisdom through a singular, memorable, life-changing event is an exciting and mysterious prospect that offers the potential for a fascinating study of an enigmatic human experience. On a different level, I am curious to know whether such a phenomenon really exists, or is it simply a matter of perspective, more akin to a figure/ground reversal such as in Gestalt psychology where the initial perception of an image dominates a subject’s attention inhibiting an alternative perspective; but in an identifiable moment the subject’s focus shifts so that the background becomes the focus, and the original figure fades into the background abruptly transforming the subject’s perspective. Can real gems of wisdom emerge spontaneously that all of us can somehow benefit from and, if so, how does this happen? The possibility that we can somehow access a different level of consciousness to
arrive at universal truths that are being broadcast either internally or externally by an unexplained process is positively intriguing. This section of the chapter represents a literature search into the phenomenon of epiphany, and in a broader sense attempts to make a case for studying the occurrence and usefulness of epiphanies in educational contexts. It is divided into six parts. The first part endeavours to define epiphany by comparing and contrasting it to the related, if not identical, phenomena of peak-ecstatic and wonder experiences. The nature of each experience is outlined, the impacts on the people who experience them are described, and the prevalence of the phenomena is discussed. The second part outlines the value and functions of epiphanic experiences by examining the short- and long-term consequences that they can have. Contexts where epiphanies are common or desirable are reviewed, and the persistence of their effects is assessed. The third part attempts to answer the question, “Can epiphanies be engineered”? Some strategies for increasing the likelihood of their occurrence are offered. The ethics and desirability of attempts to engineer epiphanies are addressed in the fourth section, and limitations to the phenomenon are discussed in the fifth. In the sixth and final section, conclusions are drawn, and a rationale for further study into the phenomenon of epiphany as it applies to the context of education is offered.

**The nature of epiphany**

epiphany--3a: (1) a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event), usually simple and striking (3) an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure b: a revealing scene or moment. (www.m-w.com/dictionary/epiphany)
A traditional view of learning suggests that depending on our intelligence, we can, over time, accumulate various amounts of knowledge through experience, observation, and communication with others, which we then apply to our day-to-day lives. Gradually, through the practice of trial and error, we learn how to adapt this knowledge to different contexts thereby gaining wisdom. This process, in combination with our emotional make-up, shapes both our personality and the way that we see and interact with the external world. In contrast, epiphanies cause sudden, dramatic and lasting cognitive changes that can instantly refine or alter how we relate to the world. It is presumed that anyone can experience an epiphany, and that many people experience them more than once in their lives (Athens, 1995).

People who have experienced epiphanies report knowing that something extraordinary was happening as the event was occurring. The experience begins suddenly and can be recalled vividly in one’s mind but is difficult to describe in words. Typical reactions to the experience include surprise (because it is not usually invited or caused by one’s own volition), exhilaration, joy, and a sense of universal oneness (Miller, 2004).

Many terms have been used to try to describe the phenomenon, but the essence of it still seems illusive. In my opinion, Nelson Goud’s description of *vital moments* comes closest. Vital moments incorporate four different kinds of epiphanic experiences: peak-ecstatic experiences (Greeley, 1974; Hoffman, 199; Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1962, 1968, 1970), psychological epiphanies (Beja, 1971; Denzin, 1989), wonder experiences (Chinen, 1991; Keen, 1969), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). According to Goud, in isolation or in concert, these experiences constitute vital moments.
Vital moments are brief, life-validating experiences that are insight-laden and have the potential to crystallize thought, often guiding major decisions that influence subsequent life choices. Their onset is almost always sudden and unpredictable, and although highly pleasurable in the short term, in the longer term, they can also serve as the foundation on which a grander, transformative, life-enhancing schema will be built (Goud, 1995).

Miller (2004) designates the outcome of such experiences as *quantum changes*, describing them as pivotal moments of enlightenment and reintegration that can last and evolve over decades. He gives the example of Ebenezer Scrooge from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* as a fictional manifestation of quantum change.

I believe that peak-ecstatic and wonder experiences are not separate phenomena, but rather potential paths to epiphany, and that the resulting transformations that Miller calls quantum changes are in fact the impacts of epiphanies. In other words, they are all part of the same phenomenon. So throughout this thesis and for the purposes of the study, I use all of these terms and others as well to refer to the epiphanic phenomenon, not to create confusion, but rather to add detail and nuance to the ambiguous nature of the topic. Still, I think it is important to examine at least some of the components of these theories independently to better understand what, if anything, they have in common.

**Peak-ecstatic experiences**

Peak-ecstatic experiences are described as absorbing feelings of elation that come from sensing the interconnectedness of the universe, and a realization that one sees things for what they really are. They are remembered as the best, happiest and most wonderful experiences of one’s life (Davis, Lockwood & Wright, 1991). They are “…transient episodes of self-actualization” that anyone can experience and can be recognized as
feeling the same way to the people experiencing them regardless of their source (Maslow, 1962).

Maslow (1970) and Laski (1961) pioneered empirical studies of such experiences in the early 1960s. Andrew Greeley (1974) shed further light on the phenomenon by philosophically and psychologically analyzing religious and secular ecstasies. These three theorists formally defined the following six characteristics of peak-ecstatic experiences more than 30 years ago, yet their prevalence in literature before and since lend credence to the notion that the patterns of peak-ecstatic experiences have remained relatively constant throughout time (Goud, 1995):

1. Peak experiences elicit sensations that range from deep calm to excitation, e.g. “...a hush of peace, a soundless calm,”; “...a rushing together...one swelling harmony...almost bursting” (Laski, 1961).

2. The experience is seen as a “unique instance” where one perceives something for what it really is, independent of its analysis or utility (Maslow, 1968).

3. There is a sense that everything is somehow connected (Greeley, 1974).

4. Insights gained are more sensed and felt than interpreted logically or rationally. William James described such experiences as, “...states of insight into the depths of truth unplumbed by the intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance...all inarticulate...and carry with them a curious sense of authority” (Greeley, 1974, p. 16).

5. In the moment, these episodes are perceived as joyous, awesome, and humbling.

6. The perception of time and space are distorted.

The prevalence of peak experiences is widespread. In a representative sample of 780 people in the San Francisco area, Wuthnow (1978) discovered that, depending on the
operational definition, between 39% and 82% of the general population had experienced at least one peak-ecstatic moment. Among those who reported that they had not, Maslow (1962) found that many in fact had but were reluctant to report their incidence because they saw it as somehow embarrassing or shameful. He termed this phenomenon desacralization, describing it as a defense mechanism against being flooded by the emotion of recognizing the mystical dimension of everyday life. Considering that these were the best, happiest, and most wonderful experiences in one’s life, it seems curious that people would not want to share them. Besides desacralization, Davis, Lockwood and Wright (1991) found other important reasons for not reporting incidences of peak experience including the feeling that it was an intimately personal experience that others would not appreciate or understand; that it could not be adequately described; and that it would lose some of its power if articulated.

**Psychological Epiphanies**

A psychological epiphany is an abrupt, surprising, and uninvited revelation about one’s identity or view of life. It is perceived as a sudden change that leads to a profound, positive transformation through the reorganization of one’s identity and beliefs (Jarvis, 1997).

According to Beja (1971), unlike a religious epiphany, psychological epiphanies have naturalistic origins. Other researchers do not distinguish between the two. Liang (2006), identified six circumstances under which epiphanies occur: (a) the death of others, illness, or danger to self or others; (b) changes in relationships; (c) environmental changes such as those brought about by moves or travelling; (d) being associated with a mastery
experience; (e) the perception of involvement with a higher power; and, (f) the realization of full awareness.

Denzin elaborated on the concept of epiphany by classifying and using four distinct types of psychological epiphanies as an interpretive framework for constructing biographical and life history case studies (Patton, 2002). They are the following: the major epiphany when important moments touch every fabric of a person’s life with immediate and long term effects; the cumulative epiphany, represented by eruptions, or reactions to events that have been going on for a long period of time; the illuminative epiphany when minor events are perceived as symbolic of major patterns, problems or relationships; and the relived epiphany whose effects are immediate, but their meanings become apparent retrospectively after reliving the event (Denzin, 1989, p. 129).

Unlike peak-ecstatic experiences, epiphanies may not always be perceived as pleasurable as when one realizes that something must be abandoned (Goud, 1995). In fact, epiphanies do not have to center on an identifiable event at all. However, their suddenness, forcefulness, and impact on identity and sense of reality differentiates them from the “a-ha” realization that occurs in ordinary experience as when one solves a problem or has a good idea because the impact of epiphanies does not seem to follow a learning model of behavioural change (C’dé Baca, 2004).

**Wonder**

A wonder experience is characterized by an astonishing perception that some object, event, or person is revealing its essence. Here is an example:

A man and a woman had stopped their car next to a large maple tree late on a night in July. Swarms of fireflies surrounded the tree and the sky was covered with stars. The
woman recorded the following thoughts a few weeks later, “Car lights and engine
off...we watched...enchanted, as if the stars were flying all around us...you couldn’t tell
where the fireflies ended and the stars began...a duet of earth and sky in harmony,
played for a rapt audience of two.” (Goud, 1995, p. 51)

As with other vital moments, anyone can experience wonder, and like epiphanies,
objects of wonder seem to present themselves without one’s bidding. Typical reactions to
such experiences include uneasiness, awe, and amazement (Keen, 1969). Those who have
a wonder experience report feeling life affirmation, and entertain new possibilities and
renewed hopefulness (Chinen, 1991). Wonder provokes one to re-examine the
fundamental questions of life and is symbolic of both maturation and youth recaptured.

In summary, peak-ecstatic experiences, psychological epiphanies, and wonder
experiences are similar in that they are brief and unexpected, and contribute some
profound insight about life, most typically by revealing mysteries, evoking deep questions,
and/or offering new possibilities. Their differences lie in the circumstances of their onset,
and in the meanings they convey. Of the three, only epiphanies carry the potential to be
perceived negatively.

*The value of vital moments*

Vital moments seem to have the ability to harmonize disparate, chaotic, and complex
thoughts by revealing subconscious processes that allow one to make *intuitive leaps*
(Goud, 1995). Besides the fact that the vast majority of them are reported as being
enjoyable experiences in themselves, for many, vital moments add meaning and a sense of
purpose to life (Wuthnow, 1978). By analyzing the results of a national representative
survey about the nature of religious and secular ecstasies, Greeley (1974) discovered that
of those who had experienced them, more than half gained a deep trust in the future. In contrast, Liang (2006) found that peak experiences did not contribute significantly to psychological well-being; however, epiphanies seemed to increase one’s life satisfaction. Perhaps this discrepancy is a result of a difference in the initial mindsets of those who experience them.

William James (1902) represented epiphanies as, “...ways of bringing order to chaos, and giving direction to a life adrift.” The role of inner chaos in transformational change has been recognized as an important factor in the development of identity in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Indeed, epiphanies seem to be more abundant during times of loss and crisis, suggesting that they may play some role in adaptation (Frankl, 1973). Others have reached similar conclusions. Denzin (1989) noted that incidences of epiphanies are more frequently observed during times of calamity, or turmoil, and that they often act as catalysts in pivotal life decisions, influencing changes in self-identity. Earlier, James (1902) observed that epiphanic transformations were often preceded by feelings of despair and fallenness, and although the changes could be profound, they might only impact a particular problem or behaviour.

Jarvis (1997) found that the frequency of epiphanic experiences seemed to peak in late adolescence and early adulthood, and that these experiences were often preceded by periods of internal conflict characterized by feelings of anxiety, alienation, and depression. She used chaos theory as a framework to interpret epiphanies as large-scale structural changes to one’s belief systems that are preceded by psychological turbulence. This interpretation, in combination with the others, carries the implication that periods of chaos must be carefully evaluated and potentially embraced by facilitators of vital moments,
such as therapists and educators, as they may signal the emergence of new patterns that result in positive changes to one’s relationship to the world.

But crisis is not a precondition for epiphany, and the form and consequences of epiphanies do not seem to differ between those who experience them from a crisis point, and those who do not (Miller, 2004). The longer-term impacts of vital moments tend be on one’s core values, i.e., priorities change. For instance, descriptors of life priorities that preceded quantum changes in Miller’s (2004) study of 55 purposefully selected subjects included wealth, adventure, achievement, attractiveness, career, family, respect, and acceptance. Afterwards his subjects reported spirituality, happiness, fewer and closer relationships, generosity, and growth as top priorities. The permanence of these changes is still up for debate.

Depending on the study, the persistence of the insights gained from vital moments varies greatly. In a representative, mixed method study of 246 undergraduate college students to determine reasons why people chose not to share peak experiences, Davis, Lockwood & Wright (1991) found that of the 79% of students who reported having had the experience, 4.1% claimed the experience had had a major life-transforming impact, 11.7% claimed that the experience triggered frequent reflection without major changes to life priorities, 45.5% reported reflecting on the experience occasionally, and 36.5% gave no evidence of any lasting influence. The percentage of the cohort who reported major life changes in this study corresponds with the findings of Thomas and Cooper’s (1980) earlier study. This finding implies that sometimes the true value of a vital moment only becomes apparent after a period of incubation when subconscious cognitive processing of the
experience yields epiphanies after or even in the absence of a distinguishable event. Denzin (1989) describes this as a cumulative epiphany.

In a follow-up study to gauge the permanence of changes that resulted from epiphanies, C’de Baca (2004) re-interviewed 30 of the 55 people who reported experiencing a quantum change ten years earlier to investigate whether their experiences were viewed as a singular event, or a change process. By comparing transcripts from the original interviews, she found that most were still able to recall their respective epiphanies in great detail, and that for the majority, the changes that resulted from them have endured. Although some claimed that the initial experience was one aspect of a continuing change process, a greater number of her subjects described the episode as a singular, one-time event.

Vital moments can have therapeutic value by changing one’s character and world-view, and in so doing help people to overcome addiction or improve one’s relationships, self-esteem, or creativity (Davis, Lockwood & Wright, 1991; Greeley, 1974; Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1968, Wuthnow, 1978). In general, the permanence of such transformations seems to be proportional to the intensity of the experience. But even if the impacts of these experiences are only temporary, they can still be an important revelation of the mysterious and profound possibilities of life (James, 1902).

*Can epiphanies be engineered?*

If vital moments can have such positive life affirming impacts on those who experience them, sometimes producing lasting positive changes in a flash, then surely we should examine the conditions under which they occur and consider whether or not such moments can and should be engineered. Bien (2004) proposes that one of the oldest traditions of
engineering epiphanies comes from the practice of Buddhism. Since it does not require any particular faith, or prior beliefs, and its practice involves intense cognitive and experiential processes that create mindfulness, Buddhist practitioners purposefully strive to accept the truth that underlies experience and may therefore deliberately invite epiphany. Part of the technique involves meditating on a koan or unanswerable question until logical processes are exhausted. Then answers that arise from intuitive wisdom are free to present themselves. These are recognized as being different in both kind and quality than those reached either superficially or through dedicated study. In this tradition, facilitators of such experiences employ compassion and equanimity to let things unfold as they will, acknowledging that the true nature of reality is revealed beyond one’s conscious control.

In psychotherapy, one’s life dilemmas might serve as the koans that precipitate epiphanies; predicaments that cannot be solved at the same level of analysis as they were formed or are expressed. The intuitive insights that result from sustained attention to these life koans can lead to resolutions, rather than answers that sound good but have little psychological impact. In both traditions, meditation, creativity, and attention to the symbolic nature of dreams and visions is thought to prepare the mind for epiphany (Bien, 2004).

Exposure and openness to triggers is another way to increase the likelihood of experiencing a vital moment. Triggers are the circumstances, such as nature, the arts, love and sex, exercise and movement, childbirth, and prayer, under which vital moments occur (Greeley, 1974; Laski, 1961). Indeed, these and so many other things can be considered triggers that Maslow (1971) believed that exposure to or involvement in any experience approaching excellence, perfection, justice, or value carries the potential to produce a peak
experience. And although trigger activities can range from passive to active, vital moments are most likely to occur regardless of the type of trigger if one is fully engaged with the trigger activity, avoids distractions, is capable of non-rational modes of interpretation, and is open to change (Goud, 1995). Practically, this means that vital moments are more likely to occur for people who have not overscheduled their time, and who have primed their consciousness for triggers by regularly recognizing the little joys that accompany such things as changes in routine, meditation, passive observation, and creativity (Hesse, 1978). But triggers are not necessarily always positive. Miller (2004) cited examples of an abortion, a spinal cord injury, and physical threat as triggers that led to transformational changes.

Even so, exposure to triggers alone will not assure the occurrence of vital moments. Mindset is also important. Carl Rogers (1980) postulated that since vital moments are sudden and unpredictable, the ideal state of mind is one of receptive openness wherein one attempts to perceive a situation for what it is rather than to try to impose meaning on to it. In essence, it means giving up control and letting an experience unfold itself. The following analogy substantiates his point: “When I look at the sunset...I don’t find myself saying, ‘Soften the orange a little on the right hand corner; and put a bit more purple along the base, and use a little more pink in the cloud colour.’ I don’t try to control a sunset. I watch it with awe as it unfolds” (Rogers, 1980, p. 22).

Practicing receptive openness has been a commonly used therapeutic technique that has been particularly effective at managing excessively controlling behaviours (Ornstein, 1992; Progoff, 1992). A more active approach to achieving such a mindset is to engage in a flow experience. A flow experience is characterized by successfully accomplishing a
challenging activity that tests the limits of one’s skills. Vital moments have been found to occur more frequently than normal during such experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Alcoholics Anonymous is perhaps one of the most well-known and overt examples of an organization that attempts to engineer epiphanies. They incorporate the mindset of receptive openness into a carefully orchestrated program of activities by which certain things are expected to happen to a prospective candidate at certain times. Athens (1995), attempted to characterize these things as stages that accompany the dramatic self-changes, which result from epiphanic experiences. She claimed that initially, one must experience a fragmentation of oneself as a result of a traumatizing or inexplicable experience that is both confusing and irresolvable. In an attempt to reconcile the experience, one then creates a provisional self that can make sense of what has happened. This provisional self must undergo a test of experience to confirm that it is better suited to interpret the world and guide subsequent decisions than the original self. If it passes this test, i.e., it is somehow validated by an external community, a more lasting transformation of personality occurs, and a new identity and relationship to the world emerges.

In the context of education, it can be argued that vital moments have been engineered in wilderness rights of passage and in coming of age ceremonies since the dawn of time. Contemporary examples that strive to create peak experiences might include programs like Outward Bound, Class Afloat, and other outdoor and experiential, and arts-based programs.

Davis, Lockwood & Wright (1991) muse on the possibility of a course where students are encouraged to find ways of discussing their own vital moments by examining how others have described them in the past. They envision that such a course could facilitate
shared understandings about the phenomenon so that those who experience it can describe
the event and its impact more effectively, and the external validity of the lessons learned
from such experiences could be examined. They also suggest that in studying vital
moments, students would learn to recognize and perhaps engage common triggers and
optimal mindsets, thereby potentially increasing the frequency of such experiences in their
own lives.

There is some evidence to suggest that there is also a physiological component to the
epiphanic experience that should be acknowledged to increase the chances of successfully
engineering the phenomenon. Vivelo (1984) found that the body perceives many of the
evocative stimuli or triggers that accompany vital moments as physiological stressors that
initiate the fight or flight response, also known as the general adaptation syndrome. The
associated release of adrenaline, testosterone, and glucose into the bloodstream can create
a sense of telescopic focus and euphoria that one could psychologically interpret as life
affirming or particularly meaningful. Consequently, he suggests that vital moments may
be little more than rationalizations of “a glucose high” and that many of civilization’s
greatest thinkers who have attributed their ideas to epiphanies have simply learned to
induce this physiological state at will and direct its affects to a “heightened awareness.”

Neurologist V.S. Ramachandran studies the functions of various parts of the brain
using brain-injured patients. He strives to understand the importance of what humans
subjectively add to quantitative measures of brain activity. Amongst his conclusions are
that the capacity to process inputs and interpret meaning resides in a specific brain
location (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998). If this is true, then in order to try to induce
an epiphany, facilitators of the experience may need to learn more about how to stimulate
the use of that part of the brain (Patton, 2002). This, combined with the identification of aforementioned other factors that increase the odds of inducing vital moments, suggests that epiphanies can to some degree be engineered, but is it ethical to do so? This question is the focus of next section of the paper.

**The ethical implications of engineered epiphanies**

Personality is an expression of one’s identity and is formed throughout life via experiences and influences, both internal and external (C’de Baca, 2004). In conjunction with our worldview, it informs the decisions that we make and the nature of our social relationships. Clearly then, any attempt to shift or alter personality through epiphany is burdened by a serious ethical concern. Specifically, assuming it is possible to purposefully create an epiphany, and epiphanies can result in large-scale lasting personality changes, how would the decision that a personality transformation should occur be made, especially in light of the evidence that not all such transformations are positive?

Problems associated with pursuing vital moments tend to occur when the trigger activities are manipulated, or deviate too far from their natural state or frequency. Psychoactive drug abusers, ‘adrenalin junkies’, and those that sustain a mindset of receptive openness and spontaneity for too long can become indecisive, self-absorbed, and “stuck” because this state of readiness to experience epiphany precludes action. Alternatively, it can make one overly impulsive, thereby hindering one’s ability to assume the responsibilities associated with building long term social structures such as families, communities, and careers (Keen, 1969). Furthermore, when purposeful engagement in trigger activities does not result in the desired vital moments, more dangerous types of triggers might be sought, e.g. cults (Maslow, 1970). A regime of sleep deprivation, social
segregation, exposure to charismatic speakers, and participation in group rituals are formulaic ways that cults engineer ecstatic experiences that serve to ‘program’ prospective members. For this reason, Nowinski (2004) contests the notion that vital moments are always positive and pro-social and suggests that a destructive motivating vision could also reorganize one’s self-identity and worldview such as that which guided the Columbine shooters, or Susan Atkins’ peak experience killing Sharon Tate while a member of the infamous Manson family.

Yet in other contexts, engineering epiphanies can have important, positive, and lasting effects. Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, credits epiphany for the most significant turning point in his life. He suddenly realized that he had choice in the direction that his life was following, and that continuing along his alcoholic path was also a choice. Wilson’s epiphany was the impetus behind Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12-step program (Nowinski, 2004).

Vital moments are only one of many paths to knowledge and truth. Their mysterious nature implies that the validity of the insights gained from them should be externally verified. Particular caution should be heeded when one tries to impose a vision gained from such an experience on others. Historically, political and religious tyranny has often been the result when people in power have been guided by mystical visions (Greeley, 1974). In addition, the potential for dramatic and lasting changes to one’s personality that can result from epiphanic experiences suggests that the motivation behind those that strive to engineer epiphanies should be critically examined.
Counterarguments

At least two arguments refute the existence and value of the quantum changes that accompany epiphanies. The first questions the suddenness of the event and its impact while the other disputes the validity of the resultant changes.

Despite the evidence presented thus far, there are those that wonder whether or not the suddenness of changes brought about by epiphanies is misrepresented, or rather a matter of perspective. In the clinical context, Bien (2004) hypothesizes that by reflecting on a dilemma over time that seemingly has no rational solution, clients prime themselves for what they perceive as an epiphany, but in fact the change that appears dramatically has actually developed over time. He presents two interesting metaphors to illustrate his point. Consider the process of water reaching its boiling point. Does the water boil suddenly or gradually? When is the water actually boiling—when bubbles start to appear, or when bubbles break the water’s surface? Observing continuously, the process seems gradual (a watched pot eventually boils). However, if an observer leaves a pot of water on a hot stove and returns to find it boiling, it could be perceived to have happened suddenly. Similarly, imagine an over-ripened fruit falling from a tree. It falls suddenly but has been ripening continuously over time. In either case, an argument could be made that the changes occurred suddenly or gradually over time. If the latter is true, then perhaps the impacts of so-called epiphanies coincide with traditional learning models after all.

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (1991) provides a more concrete example of this argument in an educational context. According to this theory, we make sense of our experiences within a paradigm that has been formed by what we have learned and experienced in the past. Ways of perceiving events, understanding thoughts and emotions,
and anticipating the future are filtered through this personal paradigm to create a meaning scheme, or way of looking at the world. This meaning scheme is further influenced by our language and culture, and while providing us with a framework for interpreting the world, it also limits us from using alternative viable frameworks to construe new phenomena. So when we encounter a novel circumstance that does not fit into our personal paradigm, a perspective transformation may occur. A perspective transformation happens when one becomes aware of how and why the structure of assumptions associated with a meaning scheme constrains our ability to see a situation for what it really is. It can only happen through introspection, and then by intentionally deciding to assimilate an alternate perspective. It implies a conscious recognition that one’s old perspective is no longer adequate to resolve some type of dilemma or crisis and that a paradigm shift, or new meaning scheme, is required. According to Mezirow (1991), these perspective transformations can be precipitated by a series of internal conflicts, epiphanies, or in response to an externally imposed crisis. Perspective transformations ultimately lead to the most significant types of long-term changes in behaviour. Thus, by transformational learning theory, the epiphanic event may only be the identifiable trigger that leads to a more prolonged, conscious reorganization of identity.

The second limitation of the phenomenon of epiphany relates to the lack of evidence to support the claim that the insights obtained through such intuitive leaps can withstand rational external validation (Maslow, 1968; Greeley, 1974). If an epiphany is truly indescribable, and incapable of being understood by others, then what if any benefit does it serve? Even if it creates a sense of inner peace or life validation in the person that experiences it, such a transformative experience that changes a person’s self-identity
carries the potential to ostracize him from his social network and delude him into forsaking his responsibilities in favour of a grander purpose.

**Conclusions**

Self-identity and meaning are inevitably gained over time and by experience. Learning, gaining proficiency, and attaining excellence all require dedication and sustained effort and are essential to experiencing a full life. Still sometimes a piece that gives meaning to one’s existence is missing. It is precisely at these times that we should, against our intuition, wait, and let life present its own meanings.

In essence, epiphanies are developmental metamorphoses. Regardless of whether or not the resulting changes produced last or result in ultimate peace and happiness, like romantic love, epiphanies can still be valued as worthwhile, life-affirming moments. As such, their use in the realm of education should certainly be explored further. If Miller’s (2004) speculation that the ability to experience and describe vital moments represents an evolution in consciousness in the human race is right, then learning more about this process could potentially lead to a collective epiphany about the depths of understanding that our species is capable of.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

An empirical study of epiphanies cannot follow the traditional route of scientific inquiry whereby the systematic observation of a phenomenon leads to its detailed description. For one thing, access to the event is difficult to arrange. The unexpected, uninvited, and private nature of epiphanies combined with the randomness of the circumstances behind their occurrence makes it difficult to coordinate observers, identify potential subjects, and record any findings without interfering with the experience.

Furthermore, even in settings where epiphanies are to some degree engineered to be more likely to occur, such as at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, programmed retreats, and hospitals, the wait for an epiphany could be prohibitively long (Miller & C’dé Baca, 1994). Therefore, for the sake of practicality, the data sought for this study consisted primarily of retrospective, first-hand accounts of the experience.

Before any purposeful analysis of the phenomenon could begin, instruments were developed to yield data that attended to a number of methodological questions and challenges. These included the following:

1. Who would be deemed to have had an epiphany?
2. How would these individuals be identified and solicited to participate in the study?
3. What sorts of tests would be sufficient to determine that an epiphany had occurred?
4. In what manner would participants relate their experiences?
5. How could we be confident that the subjects’ recollection of their experiences and the after-effects would be accurate?
The first two of these questions were addressed by the sampling strategies used. In order to recruit participants to the study, I initially intended to use a strategy similar to the one employed by Miller and C’dé Baca in their 1994 study of *quantum change*. To recruit participants to their study, Miller and C’dé Baca convinced a journalist to write a newspaper article sensitizing a broad audience to the construct of quantum change through a fictional account of such an event. Those who believed they had shared a similar experience were asked to participate in a series of interviews (Conaway, 1991). Once my own research proposal was cleared by the General Research Ethics Board at Queen’s University, I began to seek out a cohort of volunteers by making phone calls, writing letters, and trying to arrange meetings with the editorial staff of the Kingston Whig Standard, the most read local daily newspaper in the area. Repeated attempts to solicit a writer to run an article about epiphanies and request volunteers to participate in my study were ignored. So instead, I purchased a quarter-page advertisement in another newspaper, The Kingston Heritage—a free, weekly, community newspaper with a general readership (Appendix A). Because of space and cost limitations, I was unable to incorporate an example of an epiphany in that ad. Alternatively, I included a dictionary definition followed by a request for volunteers who perceived that their core values had been transformed in a relatively short period of time by a singular, poignant event to answer a questionnaire or to take part in a face-to-face interview. Believing that this ad would not garner the same degree of interest as an article run in the Whig Standard, I opted to solicit participants with flyers posted throughout the community as well. These flyers included all the information that was in the newspaper ad as well as a personal account of an epiphany (Appendix B). More informal methods to recruit participants such as serendipitous and
snowball sampling were also employed. Whenever I felt that it was appropriate, I would bring up the topic of epiphanies at social gatherings, and after some discussion about what qualified as an epiphany, I would ask if anyone who believed that they had experienced something similar would be willing to participate in my study by completing a questionnaire. In the course of discussing the topic, sometimes friends and acquaintances would recommend that I contact one of their associates who they believed had experienced a particularly dramatic or poignant example of an epiphany. On three occasions I followed their advice.

In all three of the sampling methods used, I assumed that sensitizing people to the construct of epiphany through an example and a definition beforehand gave potential participants enough information about the phenomenon to determine whether or not their own personal experiences would be relevant to share for the purposes of this study. In other words, the participants were self-selected. Along with a letter of information and a consent form, a questionnaire was sent out to each person who expressed interest in participating. Potential participants were asked to read a letter of information, which described the purpose of the study and what their involvement would entail (Appendix C), and to sign a written consent form (Appendix D), which assured them that there were no known risks associated with their involvement in the study, before completing the questionnaire, or if they preferred, meeting with me to be interviewed. In addition, prospective participants were informed that the information that they provided would be treated as confidential, and that their identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms. In consultation with my supervisor, it was deemed that conducting five face-to-face interviews, and collecting between ten and twenty completed questionnaires would
be a sufficient amount of data for the scope of this study. In the end, 16 people participated. The data were collected over a four-month period between July and October of 2008. A summary of the 16 participants’ pseudonyms, their genders, and the type of data obtained from each is presented in the table below.

Table 1  
A Summary of the Data Collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type of Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Interview, Artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire, E-mail, Artefact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Interview, E-mail, Artefact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire, Artefact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire, Artefact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire, Artefacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Interview, Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In an attempt to verify that the participants’ experiences did indeed qualify as epiphanies, factors such as the magnitude of the perceived changes, the clarity of recall, the suddenness of the event, and the degree to which the event was perceived as having been precipitated by an external source rather by one’s own volition were gauged in both interview and survey questions (Miller & C’dé Baca, 1994), specifically Part B of the questionnaire (Appendix E), and Part III of the interview guide (Appendix F).

The participant questionnaire was adapted from three life experience surveys: Csikszentmihalyi’s Experience Sampling Form (ESF) (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1997), Privette’s Life Experience Questionnaire (Privette, 1984), and Sarason, Johnson, and Siegel’s Life Experiences Survey (1978). This hybrid instrument, along with questions developed for the semi-standardized, open-ended interview (Appendix F), was designed to gather information about (a) what people who experience epiphanies are like; (b) the circumstances that surround epiphanies; (c) how people perceive the epiphany in the instant that it happens, and; (d) what the after-effects may be.

Confronting these questions from a phenomenological perspective required recognition that the epiphanic experience is a convergence of the perceiver and the world. As such, provisions were made in the types of questions asked for information to emerge that related to internal factors such as attention to one’s thoughts about, and perceptions of the experience, as well as information about the external dimensions of the event such as time, location, activity, and social setting (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997).

Data that described what people who experience epiphanies are like came from a combination of demographic information taken from the questionnaires, and responses gathered from the first part of the interviews. Using questions developed for the study of
flow experience, information regarding the subjects’ self-concept, personal influences, life goals and challenges, and motivations were used to determine if there are certain personality traits that predispose someone to having an epiphany (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1997). Data related to the circumstances that led to the epiphanies, how the experiences were perceived, and synopses of the significance of the events were collected in written form from Part C and D of the questionnaires, and orally from questions posed in Part II and III of the interview guide. Minimal structuring was imposed on the participants’ accountings of their epiphanies to optimize both authenticity, and flexibility in their analysis. In order to confront the fifth methodological challenge, specifically, to dampen the effects of memory gaps from retrospective accounts, and to externally validate the subjects’ interpretations of the events and their effects, participants were asked to supplement the oral and written accounts of their experiences with personal artefacts such as art, journal entries, letters, and manuscripts that were inspired by, or were otherwise relevant to their experiences, whenever possible. To minimize the chance that participants would be externally motivated to make up epiphany stories for this study, financial remuneration was not offered.

Once the raw data were collected, both the interviews and epiphany stories from the questionnaires were transcribed. Some on-going electronic correspondence with a couple of participants was exchanged in an effort to clarify the meanings behind certain parts of the testimonies.

**Methodological scope and limitations**

"Nothing is sudden. Not an explosion – planned, timed, wired carefully – not the burst door. Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant."
Despite my excitement at having carried out this research, the nagging problem of the reality of the phenomenon of epiphany persists. How can we be sure that epiphanic transformations are really sudden, uninvited windows to enlightenment and not in fact the culminations of gradual instances? In an attempt to circumvent this problem I committed to collecting and analyzing the data using a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology as a theoretical perspective seeks to describe the essence of a lived experience. Hermeneutics gives us the additional lens of examining the meanings that are assigned to that experience. Therefore, since the participants in this study believe they have had an epiphany, and I have made efforts to verify their claim by providing opportunities for rich descriptions and detailed accounts of their experiences, then the construct of epiphany, through a mutual negotiation and acceptance of terms, is as real an experience as any, open to empirical examination (van Manen, 1997).

Then there is the problem of language. Acknowledging that a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective seeks to describe the meanings assigned to life experiences, but at the same time recognizes that human experience is always more complex than an oral or written explanation can reveal, the unique, highly personal, and extraordinary experience of epiphany will have undoubtedly caused some of the salient features of the participants’ experiences to have become lost in their telling (van Manen, 1997). For this reason, I made efforts to verify that I had understood all that I could regarding my participants’ intended meanings throughout the interview process by asking clarifying questions and recording our conversations so that I could revisit what was said later. I took similar care when transcribing the interviews to create verbatim transcriptions of what was
said. Throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this research I tried hard to resist the lure of imposing unintended meanings on my participants’ thoughts, feelings, and emotions when such meanings were absent or unclear.

Besides these potential philosophical limitations, there were also more practical challenges associated with conducting this research. Firstly, in terms of sampling, I found it difficult to provide an account of an epiphany that evoked widespread recognition of the phenomenon. My own epiphany clearly attracted some participants to the study but may have excluded others whose transformational experiences may have been illuminating. Secondly, Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that when subjects gave retrospective reports of the meanings they assigned to quantum change events and the concomitant effects of these events on their lives, at least some of these were revealed to have come about because of other unrelated developmental processes and historical events that happened after the initial experience. The problem of assigning a fixed end point to the influence of a singular vital moment exists for this study as well. Despite including an interview question that asked participants explicitly how they knew that the experience was over, no definitive answers emerged.

But perhaps the most significant limitation of this study is the scope required to meaningfully answer the thesis question. Although adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective in developing the data collection instruments has been helpful for extracting detailed descriptions of the participants’ epiphanic experiences, the purpose of the study is to characterize what it means to have an epiphany in general, preferably adding to our current understanding of the phenomenon. Given the detail and meticulousness required to collect rich and authentic data by phenomenological methods,
the questionnaire and interview data from the limited number of participants, although interesting as a collection of case studies, may be too sparse to clarify, or add meaning to what is already known about epiphanies. This limitation threatens both the educational and academic significance of the results.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

This section of the thesis presents the results of the study in five parts. The first part gives an overview of the data that were collected. Each subsequent part is a sublimation of sorts, of data with substantive significance (Patton, 2002), which emerged in response to the questions implicitly posed in the design of the method; namely (a) what kinds of people have epiphanies; (b) what are the circumstances that trigger the experience; (c) how do people perceive and interpret the event, and, (d) what are the consequences? The full analysis of these data is presented in the next chapter. However, throughout this chapter I make occasional interpretive comments where doing so will help to elucidate some of the findings later.

After describing the data, the subsequent section draws from interview testimony as well as data from Part A, the demographic information section of the participant questionnaire, to answer questions related to the theme, “Who has epiphanies”? This is an attempt not to create an archetype personality from those who volunteered to participate in the study but rather to portray a little bit about the people who volunteered to share their intimate epiphany experiences with me.

In the third section, I summarize the trigger events that led to the participants’ epiphanies, using data collected from Parts B and C of the participant questionnaire (Appendix E) as well as relevant responses to questions posed in the interviews, and reluctantly try to place them into Liang’s (2006) six categories of circumstances under which epiphanies and peak experiences occur. I do this reluctantly because to do so requires that I condense each of these profound experiences into a concise description that
succinctly conveys the trigger yet still acknowledges the unique and personal circumstances that frame each participant’s experience and avoids denigrating their efforts in recounting them to me in greater detail. This is an exercise fraught with the potential for researcher effects to threaten the internal validity of the study. Nevertheless, I have chosen to use Liang’s framework because I think it can contextualize some findings about the settings, both physical and psychological, which led to the epiphanies reported by my participants, and link their experiences with findings of similar studies that recognize the phenomenon of epiphany. In order to dampen the researcher effects of this style of reporting, in cases where no category seems to fit, I acknowledge this, in a category entitled “outliers” rather than make Liang’s theory fit the data.

The fourth section depicts some of the thoughts and feelings that the participants reported in relation to the epiphany experiences themselves through excerpts of their written and oral epiphany stories; and the final part attempts to portray some of the conclusions, both ongoing and realized, that my gracious volunteers have shared with me about their experiences. The data used in these final two sections of the chapter were drawn from answers to Part C of the questionnaire, and Part II & III of the interview guide (Appendix F).

The data are presented, whenever possible, with excerpts of verbatim testimony offered by the participants. The excerpts found throughout this chapter and the next have been encoded so that they can be easily recognized by participant (pseudonym), and source. References to page and line numbers that indicate where the excerpts can be found within the original interview and questionnaire transcripts are also included so that the context in which the testimony was offered can be revisited. An example of the coding that follows
each excerpt is (Jo, I, p. 10, 2–13), where the first code, “Jo” refers to the first two (in one case three) letters of the contributing participant’s pseudonym, the second, “I”, refers to the data source, in this case an interview, the third, “p. 10” refers to the page number of the transcript, and the fourth, “2–13” refers to the line numbers within the transcript. Please see Appendix G for a key to interpreting the codes further.

Before I delve into what was found, a caveat: despite an urge to draw unwarranted generalizations about epiphanies, we must be careful to honour the individuality of each story and its teller, in other words, to maintain a unique case orientation and recognize that the phenomenon of epiphany is a highly personal and powerful one that does not heartily welcome being trivialized through categorization.

**An overview of the data**

The data were collected between July and October of 2008, nuanced at the beginning by the wettest Eastern Ontario summer on record, and finishing with the backdrop of a leafless and typically crisp mid-fall. In total, the sources of data that were collected consisted of 5 face-to-face interviews ranging from just over an hour, to over an hour-and-a-half, 11 completed written questionnaires, 29 pieces of electronic correspondence from participants containing exchanges of thoughts and ideas about epiphanies, and 10 artefacts that were associated with and meant to supplement the written and oral testimonies described above. They included (a) a copy of a Master’s thesis in education and a book of poetry, each written by subjects involved in the study; (b) two photographs of one of the participants, one taken before her epiphany, and one after; (c) three sketches that a participant drew to illustrate the visions he had during his epiphanic experience; (d) a set of lyrics to a song that was written by one of the participants, and was inspired by her
epiphany; (e) an obituary, and; (f) a handwritten letter of thanks penned by a participant to her voice teacher describing the on-going impact that the epiphany that she had experienced through singing was having on her life.

The interviews were conducted throughout the summer and early fall in various locations including two on the deck of my home, two at my participants’ homes, and one at a McDonald’s restaurant. Three of the five people that volunteered to be interviewed became aware of this study and made arrangements to meet with me by phone or electronic mail, after seeing and then responding to the newspaper advertisement that I placed in the July 29th, 2008 edition of the Kingston Heritage community newspaper to solicit participants to my cause (Appendix A). Of the remaining two interviewees, one volunteered to participate after being sensitized to the topic by attending my colloquium, and the other I contacted myself to ask for his involvement on the recommendation of several of my peers.

I distributed 48 written questionnaires electronically, by traditional mail, and by hand to people who expressed interest in the topic. The recipients of the questionnaires were made aware of my study either through my advertisements, both in the newspaper and via flyers posted throughout my local community, or through informal conversations that I had had at various social gatherings such as dinner parties, kids’ birthday parties, a hockey tournament, and a post-colloquium gathering. Of the 48 questionnaires sent out, 11 were completed and returned to me along with signed letters of information and consent; five electronically and seven by mail.

I did not know 12 of the 16 participants that contributed data to this study beforehand. The other four I did. Two my wife and I consider as close friends. We regularly share in
their love of outdoor adventure and fine cooking, and we also enjoy playing music together. The other two I would characterize as distant friends or close acquaintances. I know them as either members of, or spouses of members of my wife’s two book clubs.

**Who volunteered to participate?**

As indicated above, sixteen people volunteered to participate in this study. They ranged in age from 32 to 63 with a median age of 44. Eleven of the participants were female, and five were male. I interviewed two women and three men, and received completed questionnaires from nine women and two men. Twelve of the sixteen respondents had an undergraduate university degree or higher, three had completed college, and one had not studied formally past high school. Regardless of their level of education, one of the things that I noticed during the interviews was how articulately each participant spoke, and the considerable depth of analysis that they had dedicated to understanding their experiences. Two had based their post-graduate theses on their epiphanies, and one had written a book based on his. It did not surprise me therefore that all five interviewees considered themselves smart and creative when asked about how they viewed themselves:

“I guess I have a bias for intelligence, and a bias for…I have a female brain so I have a huge bias for empathy, and empathetic behaviour.” (Jo, I, p.10, 24–25)

“…and I’m a person who needs intellectual companionship. And I don’t mean that to sound snotty, because I didn’t start university until I was 38.” (Sy, I, p. 4, 8–10)

“I’m an intellectual, and if I could, I’d just build decks.” (Ja, I, p. 1, 18–19)

“Well, it depends how you define smart. I was academically oriented. First term, I always got high marks and I got bored silly.” (Lu, I, p. 3, 15–16)
Most of the participants were married or part of a common-law relationship (n=11), three were engaged or considered themselves as being involved in a serious relationship, and two were single. Professionally, participants identified themselves as artists, educators, members of the military, journalists, politicians, clergymen, administrators, writers and travelers. Ten of the sixteen participants rated their overall satisfaction with what they were doing for a living as five or lower on a ten-point Likert scale, where a rating of one indicated complete satisfaction, and a rating of ten indicated complete dissatisfaction (see Question #7, Appendix D). In other words, most were happy with their professional lives. Only two reported being generally unsatisfied, and four did not answer.

Eight participants reported that they regularly experienced periods of hyper-focus wherein their concentration became so intense that they were unaware of normally noticeable things and lost track of time. The activities that they identified as causing this state could for the most part be considered as creative pursuits such as writing, painting, sculpting, playing and listening to music, reading, and playing video games. Four participants reported that they did not routinely experience such a state of mind, and three did not answer the question. This data was gathered from question #8 in the participant questionnaire, which was adapted from Csikszentmihalyi’s Experience Sampling Form (1997) to measure people’s predisposition to experience flow.

When asked to rate themselves on an eleven-point Likert scale of dichotomous self-descriptions (see Question #9 in Appendix E), with zero corresponding with generally negative or undesirable traits such as angry, tense, nervous, and unsuccessful, and ten representing positive, or desirable traits such as secure, at ease, optimistic, and contented, all but one of the respondents averaged five or above in their answers to thirteen questions.
with a median response to all questions of seven. Therefore, it could be said that the majority of participants who responded to the questionnaire had a relatively positive self-concept. Furthermore, I would describe all of the participants who volunteered to share their personal epiphany stories, especially those to whom I was a stranger, as brave, generous, and kind with their time.

**What were the circumstances that triggered the participants’ epiphanies?**

Among Liang’s (2006) research findings were that peak-experiences and epiphanies often occurred in the wake of the following events: (a) the birth or death of others, illness, or danger to self or others; (b) changes in relationships; (c) exposure to nature and environmental changes; (d) being associated with a mastery experience, (e) the perception of involvement with a higher power, and (f) the realization of full awareness. What follows is a brief synopsis of some of the trigger events that led to the epiphanies, accompanied by a verbatim excerpt from each participant’s account of their experience. The verbatim excerpts are meant to enhance the reflexivity of my synopses. Where I feel it is fitting, I classify the event under one of the aforementioned categories. The synopses are not meant to summarize the epiphanies themselves, but rather to illustrate some of the settings that led the participants to fresh perspectives.

**The birth or death of others, illness, or danger to self or others**

Sylvie’s epiphany came while trying to make sense out of her mother’s suicide.

…my mother killed herself on Mother’s Day. And my sister and brother met me at Union Station, and we drove up to Acton…My mother had left a suicide note for my father, and then one for the children, for the three of us, and, they had destroyed them
by the time I got back. So I never saw her suicide note[s]…And they never wanted to talk about it. They wouldn’t tell me what was in them. (Sy, I, p. 7, 22–31)

Anne’s brother developed locked-in syndrome after a brain stem stroke in his 30s. She felt that she developed an ability to communicate with both him and her recently deceased mother while at his bedside. She has since offered her abilities to help others communicate with lost loved ones.

…a life-changing experience was when Mark was dying… Now, I’ve told you that I’m an intuitive. I told you about the way that he died. When he was dying, we were surrounding his bed, his hospital bed, and we were all very quiet, and I decided that I needed it to get even quieter. And so I quieted myself down, and I just did that by breathing, or closing my eyes, and just slowing myself down…suddenly I heard my mother’s voice, and my mother had died three months before…I was not in the room when he took his last breath. I was in another room. I came back in to pick up my belongings at the bottom of the bed…everyone else was out of the room, and in my heart I said, “Good-bye Michael”. And in my head, he clearly said back to me, “I’ll see you soon.” (An, I, p. 5, 14–32)

Louise’s nephew had attempted suicide, and was recovering in hospital. Coincidentally, he ended up sharing a room with Dave, Louise’s close friend and colleague who had been fatally injured in a motorcycle crash. At Dave’s funeral, she came to the sudden realization that her friend’s death had lifted her nephew’s psychological burden.

…suddenly he caught my attention and the whole church just melted away, and I was mesmerized by what he was saying. This priest was looking and talking directly at me!
He asked, why do good people have to die? Sometimes when they go they’re taking on a burden for someone else. I felt like the air was being sucked out my body and replaced with a bright yellow shiny light! (Lo, Q, p. 4, 24–29)

Harry was thrown out of his mother’s car in a collision and remembers flying through the air. He escaped the ordeal unscathed, but his mother suffered permanent injury.

The next thing I know, I’m in the air looking at the scene as in a frozen moment that in a second later starts to move to normal speed. I feel the speed and I see our car and the road, and in the next split second, I’m sitting in a pile of snow next to the road…I started to appreciate each day. I keep making wishes before bedtime, and I started to think about death. (H, Q, p. 4, 3–8)

Since childhood, Judy has had a strong emotional and spiritual connection with animals. Ironically, she feels that she also kills more animals while driving than is statistically normal, and this has been extremely disturbing for her. After hitting a deer, she came to the understanding that she may have a morbid role as an empathetic envoy for human indifference towards other creatures.

Emotionally, hitting the deer was incredibly difficult. It didn’t die right away and luckily two friends were with me to jump out of the car to assist by moving her aside and being with her until she died. I sat in the car crumpled in a tiny ball focusing all of my thoughts on that poor creature...Perhaps because I can communicate and have an emotional connection with living creatures, I have been “chosen” as the one who should hit them, because they will get the respect, attention and love they deserve, whereas others would leave them on the road and forget what had happened five minutes later. (Ju, Q, p. 5, 1–13)
As a little girl, Mary suddenly realized that she had more power than she had imagined and should trust her instincts more after accidentally tobogganing onto a street and under a moving car, yet miraculously sliding out the other side with only a cut on her forehead to show for it.

Everything went back to bright light again and I heard noises. They were pulling me out and helping me up. I walked the way up to our house. I could feel my pulse in my skin, and the bleeding from the open wound on my face. My mom and the driver helped me to the bathroom. I needed to pee. (Mar, Q. p. 4, 1–4)

**Changes in relationships**

Jacob’s epiphany, which led him on an extraordinary academic journey of self-discovery, came to him in a series of frightening dreams, which started at the end of a serious, long-term, romantic relationship.

So in the true spirit of a vision quest or classic sort of native narrative, I was incredibly tired, working really hard. I had also realized that my partner and best friend who I had escaped home with for well over a decade, that we weren’t in love anymore… and I’m working in this incredibly powerful place…a site with hundreds of pictographs, a place where people have gone for thousands of years to learn about themselves…one day, I go to bed, and I have the most scary and powerful dream I have ever had in my whole life…I woke up and there was this Thunderbird. Not a bird, but like a pictograph of a bird…Then again I think to myself, with all of the shit I’ve been through…yeah, it would make sense that I’d lose it. (Ja, I, pp. 7–8, 28–11)
Exposure to nature and environmental changes

Brian gained a profound respect for the power of nature after an unsuccessful rescue of a woman who had fallen into a fast-moving glacial river.

While backpacking in the Patagonian Andes with my soon-to-be fiancé, on a day hike to a picturesque glacial lake… [I witnessed] a young lady who was attempting to traverse the river (by means of a hand/foot crossing) falling into the glacial river. What was a moment earlier a serene and relaxed moment of playful exploration and appreciation of grandiose mountain peaks and glacier beauty, instantaneously changed to an emergency response. (Br, Q, p. 4, 4–9)

Association with a mastery experience

Jill’s self-confidence was awakened by the sudden discovery of her singing voice during a music lesson.

…and then I was invited to sing it through from my whole being. She [her singing teacher] said to me, “I am going to rest my head on my hands and will just be here to listen. I won’t even be looking at you.” So we pressed “Play” on the cassette recorder, and I sang…and something magical happened. I heard a voice that was so beautiful, so clear and clean, like the sound you hear when you tap a crystal bowl. (Ji, Q, p. 4, 9–14)

Jordan found self-worth and was released from a long depression while experiencing a boys’ choir’s rehearsal in an ancient cathedral in England.

The boys’ choir had just come in, and the choirmaster, and they were fiddling with, 10 and 12 year old boys…The choirmaster started them singing…and if you’ve ever experienced choir boys singing in a cathedral, it is truly impressive. It makes people believe in God. But that wasn’t my experience…and then he stopped them, and then
he yelled at them and said, “No, no, do it like this.” And they sang again, and it was beautiful...I was weeping, and it was a contrast. I was coming from this stone depression to this ethereal end response, and it was overwhelming. And so I was blubbering away and I realized, my god, if it wasn’t for me, because everybody else, they didn’t care, I looked at their faces, and I looked at the choirmaster’s face and he was mad, and the tourists, they just thought it was sweet... I realized that my individual response was absolutely perfect to every experience that I would experience in my life. (Jo, I, p. 3, 29–46)

**The perception of involvement with a higher power**

While struggling with alcoholism and the self-loathing that accompanies it, Luke had a conversion experience that abruptly transformed his life.

So I wasn’t particularly close to God or Jesus, or any of the Christian stuff. I had sort of ignored it, you know? If I was sober at Christmas, I might have gone to church, but that was about it. And I said a little prayer on the way home. I said, “God if you’re there, Jesus, if you’re there...I’m not sure you are, I’m tired of living this way. And I’m willing to go wherever you lead me, and I’m willing to pay any price, go wherever you send me; but I can’t do it alone. That means you hit bottom. And for about four or five days, I was going through all kinds of mystical experiences, very hard to describe to this day. I’m a learner by nature, so I studied my own experience. As a matter of fact, I did a thesis on my own experience. (Lu, I, p. 2, 19–28)
The realization of full awareness

Katrin experienced frequent trigger events, or recurring epiphanies that reminded her of a sudden and profound realization she had in the past; that every thought she had directly affected her reality.

One morning I was having trouble staying in that clear consciousness place and I was desiring a second cup of coffee, and I drank it but didn’t “experience” it properly. I was gulping it out of fear or dread for the day ahead…out of the corner of my eye I saw that the license plate in the next lane said “coffee”. It brought me back to that state of connectedness and I felt free again. (Ka, Q, p. 4, 9–15)

Outliers

Dianne became a vegetarian after seeing a truck packed with live chickens driving to the slaughterhouse while she was having lunch at a Chinese restaurant.

It [the truck] was stacked high and deep with tiny crates each containing a chicken enroute to the slaughterhouse. It was 31 degrees in the glaring sun. I thought as I looked at them how horrible this was for those poor animals, how miserable their packed-in living conditions for all of their brief lives, and how they suffered in those tiny cages enroute to be killed. At that moment, I was putting into my mouth a forkful of chicken. It hit me with great force that I was part of the process. (Di, Q, p. 4, 1–6)

Mandy’s life was plagued by health problems associated with being obese. Her inability to participate in family activities during a family vacation triggered a strong memory of her own mother’s weight-related struggles to engage with her children. The memory was the impetus for her remarkable weight loss.
I said out loud to myself, “Well Mandy, you’ve turned into your mother”. Here I was, 41 years old with a young family and my back was taking over my life… [Now], I have a much greater quality of life as I can participate with my kids – not watching from the sidelines like my mom used to. When I think back, my mother missed a lot of our trips, and the times when we were the happiest. (Ma, Q, p. 4, 16–21)

Becky’s career took an abrupt, unpredictable turn for no apparent reason based on an invitation from a friend.

I was working as a Head Chef in a new restaurant in Toronto’s east end in 1980. [I was] very happy at this new job and given artistic rein to create my own menu and feeling lucky to have been hired. I had no intention to change my job in other words. I was standing in the restaurant kitchen putting together a spinach ricotta pie when a friend stuck her head in the open window on her way to the washroom to say “I’ve been wanting to tell you about a new [massage] school opening up near my cottage.” Before she had finished the sentence, my epiphany had happened. Not only did I feel it was the most remarkable right thing for me to do in my life right now, but I actually saw myself doing it as if I had already graduated and had my own practice.

(Be, Q, p. 4, 5–18)

The settings, both physical and psychological that framed the epiphany experiences reported by the participants varied greatly; however, of the data collected, some form of crisis formed the backdrop for ten of fifteen stories. One epiphany story was excluded from this part of the report because it did not meet the “change in perspective” criterion used to distinguish epiphanies from ordinary events. That epiphanies are often born out of calamity is not a new finding. Frankl (1973), Denzin (1989), James (1902), and Jarvis
(1997) discovered that incidences of epiphanies are more frequent during crises, and that they may play a role in helping us adapt to irreconcilable realities. So it is not surprising that in this study, death and danger were the most common trigger events reported. And despite the tragedy associated with losing a loved one, or the fear that goes along with real danger, of the six epiphanies that I placed into this category, each could be interpreted as having fostered optimistic or hopeful outlooks. Similarly, the epiphanies that were reported as having occurred without a preceding crisis led to lasting, and arguably positive changes in perspective and in some cases, changes in behaviour as well. This finding supports the argument that epiphanies can serve as the signal for the emergence of new patterns that result in positive changes to one’s relationship to the world (Jarvis, 1997).

The meanings that the participants have assigned to their epiphanies and the conclusions they have reached are undeniably linked to the settings in which they occurred. The significance of these resolutions is explored in further detail in the final part of this chapter.

**How did the participants perceive and interpret their epiphanies?**

Epiphanies are by their very nature extraordinary, stochastic events that are different from ordinary day-to-day experiences. They are distinguished by the abrupt nature of their onset, their demand of all one’s attention, their ability to viscerally remain at the forefront of one’s memory, their seemingly unexpected and uninvited arrival, and their ability to instantly transform one’s perspective (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994). This part of the chapter attempts to convey what the participants experienced and how they felt during their respective epiphanic events. As in previous sections, verbatim interview testimony, and direct quotes from written accounts of epiphanies are used to illustrate some possible
themes that I have drawn from the data. Most of these themes have been identified from previous research cited in the literature review. However, some are original, and warrant further analysis in the following chapters.

The epiphany experience is hard to articulate, and so it can be emotionally risky to share. The difficulty of describing such a profound and highly personal event has been identified in previous studies (Miller, 2004). Many of the participants of this study shared the sentiment:

…it strikes me as the same thing, or trying to describe the colour red to a blind person, you know…it was just all so rich and meaningful, and something that I just could not talk about, even if I was surrounded by people who would be interested and engaged and would want to hear about it. I didn’t have the words to describe it.

(Sy, I, p. 11, 5–29)

Ironically, Sylvie, and several other participants managed to describe wonderfully eloquent images of their experiences anyway. Analogies used by Sylvie and another participant to describe their epiphany moments involved completing a jig-saw puzzle, and watching tumbling dominoes:

…it’s one spot missing, empty in this jigsaw, this set of jigsaw pieces that are all nicely fitting together. There’s one blank spot. And, all of a sudden, not all of a sudden, but slowly, slowly, slowly a piece descends down and into the spot. And at that point, when that piece goes in and fits…the whole section starts sparkling, illuminating, not things shooting out, not stars and fireworks, but luminous. A luminosity transfers through the pieces and kind of radiates a little bit. And that is how I can make sense of the experience. (Sy, I, p. 1, 7–13)
…so you get all these pieces and you see the images on the pieces and you start putting them together, and this and that and other people have put together pieces, and oh yeah I agree with that, and the epiphany happens when you see the picture.

(Jo, I, p. 4, 25–28)

And they tip one and then everything’s just…it’s overwhelming. I had this thought. It came to me. It wasn’t a voice. If it was a voice it was my own, I think. And at that time I had that sharp intake of breath, and all of a sudden my mind went just like the domino thing. And I was just overwhelmed. (Sy, I, p. 7, 16–20)

I found the following description of Sylvie’s thoughts during her epiphanic experience to be especially expressive:

I guess from the, just from the fact that I went, uhhh (sharp intake of breath). It seems like it was simultaneous with this understanding, this knowledge. It was almost like someone said two plus two is four….oh….so four and four is this. I guess it took my breath away. It took my breath away, and I would almost say I was stunned. But at the same time, there was just so much going on in my head. It was, and I didn’t have to push or ask any questions. All of it just started coming out. And it was just amazing, just amazing. I don’t know if you’re looking for religious apparitions or you know, somebody tapping me on the head with a little gold star. It didn’t happen like that, but it was remarkable. It set me down a path from which there is no turning back. You can’t unring a bell like that. You cannot erase. There are some memories that are so traumatic that you can bury them and hide them and all of that, but it was all around
me. I couldn’t...you can’t erase it. I can only speak for myself, but it became part of
my core being. (Sy, I, p. 9, 10–20)

Something that I think gives additional credence to findings that claim epiphanies are
different from day-to-day experiences is the fact that what some of my participants
experienced clearly caused them to question their sanity, implying that the event was, at
least for them, extraordinary.

I never shared my story ‘cause I was afraid people would think I was a kook.
( Ja, I, p. 18, 20–21)

I remember for months trying to explain to people what was going on, and it gets that
you feel isolated after awhile. Nobody understands you. And I felt I was going crazy.
(Lu, I, p. 9, 25–27)

I was also incredibly angry that this would happen to me again. As with my first
epiphany, a thought came to me quite simply and easily (as if I walked through a door)
and my perspective changed. My thought was this, and please don’t think I’m
completely nuts, because in a way this thought is, well...strange. (Ju, Q, p. 5, 5–8)

I was thoroughly convinced that I was gonna die. Like I’m terrified, terrified... and
convinced that I have totally gone over the fucking deep end, like I have lost my
mind...The only thought I had was that I was losing my mind, literally.
(Ja, Q, p. 8, 16–17)

I went through a mystical experience for about four days. I can’t describe those things.
Sometimes it seemed that I could see through buildings. I was having, umm, if you
want a good description of a conversion experience, look up in the DSM IV, umm, and look up schizophrenia. (Lu, I, p. 9, 1–4)

Some participants in the study reported that their epiphanies were satisfying, pleasurable, or even euphoric experiences, whereas others acknowledged that their experiences involved great suffering. In either case, the event was recounted by almost all the participants as having been worthwhile and life-affirming; worthwhile because it opened the door to new depths of understanding, and life-affirming because the experience was recognized as a developmental metamorphosis (Miller, 2004). Compare the following three pleasurable epiphanies with the subsequent ones that involved suffering:

**Perceived pleasurably**

That’s what that one was like. It’s not super romantic or anything like that but all of a sudden the tree got greener, the sky got bluer, the air got clearer, and I’m like, oh, wow, I’ve been a bit grey and I didn’t even know. (Ja, I, p. 7, 13–16)

This is one of the greatest experiences somebody could possibly do. There is nothing better than this. And that’s when it hit me…It was a pure epiphany, and it was a joy. It was like a junkie’s joy. It’s a rush you can never beat, and you can never repeat it, but I’ve never been depressed since, not one moment. (Jo, I, pp. 3–4, 44–4)

These types of revelations jump into my head often and become so clear that I am amazed I did not pick it up earlier. It gives me a great sense of understanding, relief and pride that it has finally made sense. (Sh, I, p. 4, 6–9)
Associated with suffering

I actually used to pray to go back to into those experiences because no matter how
difficult, they were they were really life giving… And you grow. You grow in the
hardest suffering, O.K? You know, if you hang in. So, Gethsemane is all about
transforming crushing loneliness into creative follow through, a shift.

(Lu, I, pp. 9–10, 42–3)

…in some ways I think my life would have been easier if I hadn’t had an epiphany.
But now I’ve got a life, and I’m living. You know, scratching in the dirt sometimes
trying to keep body and soul together, but I’m alive. (Sy, I, p. 17, 23–25)

To watch someone die so quickly, it’s taught me, you know, about life…I don’t think
I’ve lost anything from having those three experiences. I think that that’s been more
enriching. I don’t know that I could really say that I’m thankful that I got to experience
that, but in that context, of having to say good-bye to someone that I love, that kind of,
you know, he gave me a great gift. (An, I, pp. 11–12, 44–3)

Jacob related some advice he had received from an aboriginal social worker while trying
to interpret the meaning of his epiphany. The social worker urged him to appreciate the
intensity of life experiences even if they are painful:

He shared a story about losing his son. And he thinks back to those times on how awful
it was, and how emotionally rich it was, and how the day-to-day is so dull compared to
something as intense as that. (Ja, I, p. 11, 43–6)

Although most of the participants could readily identify the onset of their epiphanic
experiences, and relate with considerable clarity how they felt, and what they were
thinking at the time, many had difficulty in describing how the experience ended. This is because for many, the after-effects of the event persisted for a long time, and for some of my participants, they continue to this day. In other words, the epiphany experience, particularly the cognitive element, was often tricky to temporally encapsulate. Denzin (1989) encountered this problem in his own study and consequently differentiated between major, cumulative, illuminative, and relived epiphanies.

…even though it was this contained unit of experience…It’s because life is this journey…even though you may have this epiphany of change, still life goes on. And I am experiencing the ripple effect of that, and it’s been almost a year.

(An, I, p. 11, 25–31)

My epiphany happened in the Spring, but I can’t pinpoint when it happened because it kept, and keeps happening off and on. (Ka, Q, p. 4, 1–2)

At the beginning of these types of conversion experiences or epiphanies, whatever you want to call them, you don’t understand them. You go over every little detail over the rest of your life, and really, as my rector said, you’re going to have to unpack it for the rest of life. Your understanding of it will grow. (Lu, I, p. 8, 43–46)

The onset of all of the epiphany experiences described by the participants conformed to Jarvis’ (1997) finding that epiphanies were abrupt and surprising revelations about one’s identity or view of life. That the end point was difficult to recognize makes sense. It takes time to perceive, process, and assimilate an epiphany experience. Consequently, an epiphany event is difficult to place between definable “book ends.” Still, the things that people have learned from epiphanic experiences seem to carry greater authority in terms of
capturing one’s attention at the time, and inspiring change in the future than things learned by more traditional ways of gaining knowledge and wisdom. What my participants learned from their experiences is the focus of the next and final part of this chapter.

**What did participants take from their experiences?**

The meaning and significance that participants assigned to their epiphanies varied case by case. As expected, the highly personal circumstances that framed each person’s event, combined with differences in participant age, experience, and personality meant that in this study, no one archetypal conclusion was conveyed. Even so, as has been done in previous parts of this chapter, some overall themes that were identified in the literature are applied to contextualize participant testimony in this section as well. I believe that doing so helps to verify the phenomenon by aligning the results to similar frameworks used in other studies. What follows, therefore, is not a comprehensive review of all the values and meanings that participants in this study have assigned to their epiphanies. Indeed some of the meanings that were gleaned have already been alluded to in the section that described the trigger events. Rather it is a sampling of a few conclusions that fit general themes that others have also recognized; namely that epiphanies can signal maturation and reveal one’s self-identity; that epiphanies can serve to inform future actions; and that epiphanies can permanently change one’s perspective and relationship with the world.

Epiphanies can serve to help one get to know oneself better. They can reveal character traits that were previously unrealized, or they can reorganize one’s identity entirely (Denzin, 1989). As a result, some have found them useful in resolving crises and adapting to new circumstances (Frankl, 1973). For instance, Luke explained, “I gained myself, my true self. I lost my false self,” in response to an interview question regarding the ultimate
result of having an epiphany. Jacob was asked whether or not the three epiphanies that he experienced were related. He responded, “Not at all, ah, only in that I was miserable, and I would have a sense of clarity that would help me to understand myself, and the world within myself.” (Ja, I, p. 4, 36–37)

The changes in perspective that result from epiphanies can also serve to guide future life choices. For many, epiphanies add meaning and a sense of purpose to life (Wuthnow, 1978).

The epiphany was… it wasn’t that I came to an understanding of how my mother died…why she did it. It was that if I didn’t do something, I was going down that same road, which was a big shock to me…big, big, shock. (Sy, I, p. 7, 40–45)

The memory came back to me as I was sitting there by the pool. I was turning into my mother who instead of participating in her family’s lives, she heard about it afterwards. I had decided that I didn’t want to live my life that way and something had to be done. In the past when I had ended up in the Emergency Room at the hospital due to my back, doctors suggested that losing weight would help as well as strengthening my core muscles and abs. Weak abs – weak back they would say. (Ma, Q, p. 4, 33–38)

To me, what makes an epiphany differ from a cathartic moment or a revelation is that there seems to be a futuristic element involved. Not only did I feel it was the most remarkable right thing for me to do in my life right now, but I actually saw myself doing it as if I had already graduated and had my own practice. Within a week I had applied for a student loan and had enrolled in the course for the following session. This would not be described as a ‘psychic’ moment, but more of a ‘had to be’ or ‘oneness’ moment, or a knowing from looking inwards. (Be, Q, p. 4, 15–21)
The idea that epiphanies should instantly change one’s perspective about something, or everything was a criterion used to screen participants for this study. The degree of significance of the change and its permanence was left undefined. C’de Baca’s (2004) study suggested that ten years after the initial epiphanic event, most of her subjects were able to clearly recall their experience, and that the changes that ensued have persisted. Since the data I collected consisted of retrospective accounts of epiphanies, some of which occurred more than ten years hence, the conviction of the participants’ testimonies regarding the significance and permanence of their changes in perspective supports this finding. In the following four excerpts, Anne, Judy, Harry, Jacob and Luke’s testimonies serve to corroborate this point.

It’s like I’ve been churned up inside, and I’ve been changed inside by these experiences, that I can’t keep them… I can’t keep hiding anymore. I can’t hide my essence of who I am anymore. I can’t wait to see if I’ll get that phone call. You know, it’s a little bit more urgency, and it will never be the same. (An, I, p. 12, 24–28)

…as the youngest, I often felt babied, not respected for my convictions/beliefs and as a teenager, and even an adult, often lied to cover my “true” self. I don’t think it felt like an epiphany at the time; it just seemed so natural and normal. It was almost as if I was on a stroll and happened to enter a new room in life. Everything kind of changed – or at least the lens through which I viewed my life did. (Ju, Q, p. 4, 14–18)

Today, I would still say that this experience was the start point of the kind of experience. It has made me feel more alive and adventurous about life itself. I have loved to go my own way, and not been afraid to do so. It started from that day…to look
for alternative ways of living, and still keep going on that open path for love and compassion for all life. (Ha, Q, p. 4, 15–19)

…but I walked under those spruces, and I just had this huge moment of clarity, and I went, “Oh my god, you’ve come here for four years to learn how to learn.” And that’s it. That was the end of it. And so that year, I took “five and five,” and the next year I did “six and six” and started working on my thesis just to get the hell out. But every time I went into a class, I wasn’t willing to follow the prescription, like if they gave me an assignment and that assignment didn’t speak to me, then I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t do it that way, and I would do something better… this is a new way of seeing what we’re talking about. (Ja, I, p. 5, 13–21)

Life lost meaning. And one thing my conversion experience did was bring meaning, purpose, and direction. (Lu, I, p. 8, 22–23)

**Summary**

I felt that the delicate balance that I tried to strike between maintaining a unique case orientation and grouping the data under various themes initially constrained the language that I used to report the data. This experience made me question the significance of the findings. After all, what can be learned from the participants’ epiphany experiences if all that can be said is people that experience epiphanies can be like this; and the circumstances under which epiphanies occur can be like that; and some people may interpret their experiences like this? However, after reviewing the interview transcripts and written testimonials, I was reminded of the value of a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective wherein the meanings that people assign to their experiences, and the way they
choose to describe them define the phenomenon. So the data that the participants provided carries great significance in that it describes from unique perspectives, and via authentic voices, how remarkable experiences that share certain recognizable characteristics can be transformative.

The results suggest that the phenomenon of epiphany is not one coherent thing, it is many. In the next chapter, this notion, that epiphanies have multiple manifestations, is explored in greater detail.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

**Chiaroscuro– 2b:** the interplay or contrast of dissimilar qualities

3: the interplay of light and shadow on, or as if on a surface.

4: the quality of being veiled, or partly in shadow.

(www.m-w.com/dictionary/chiaroscuro)

The phenomenon of epiphany is widely recognized, at least colloquially, as an experience that can produce profound insights and suddenly transform one’s perspective about something or everything. It is presumed that anyone can experience an epiphany, and that many people do, sometimes more than once in their lives (Athens, 1995). These two truths make epiphanies a commonly recognized, stimulating topic of conversation. Yet even from the relatively small sample of epiphany stories that was collected for this study, it is clear that the experience is not one thing, but many. Or perhaps the issue is more opaque; a similar experience perceived in different ways. Conversely, epiphanies may be different experiences perceived in similar ways. Regardless, it is an enigmatic concept, a chiaroscuro, which like the pattern of sunlight on rippled water is difficult to describe, and even more challenging to interpret. The complexity of guises that an epiphany can take requires an analysis strategy that recognizes its many facets, and yet can still provide an explanatory model, which can interpret the phenomenon under a unified concept. Accordingly, the analysis that follows attempts to enhance our understanding of epiphanies not by coalescing its various features into a coherent explanation. Instead, the goal of this chapter is to augment our knowledge of what epiphanies are by analyzing some of their attributes along contrasting dimensions. The following six dimensions of
epiphany are used to explore some of the participants’ experiences with the hope of enhancing our understanding of the epiphanic experience:

1) The Amplification of Self \(\leftrightarrow\) Changing Oneself;
2) A Private Experience \(\leftrightarrow\) A Public Experience;
3) Deductive, Rational \(\leftrightarrow\) Inductive, Emotional;
4) Deliberate \(\leftrightarrow\) Serendipitous;
5) Incremental Effect \(\leftrightarrow\) Epochal Effect;
6) Having personal meaning \(\leftrightarrow\) Having universal meaning.

It should be noted that the aforementioned analysis strategy does not strive to include aspects of each participant’s experiences. Instead, pertinent passages taken from the participants’ testimonies in Part C of the questionnaires and from all related parts of the interviews are placed on dimensions where they serve to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon. In other words, what follows is not an exhaustive recounting of the data, but rather a refraction of how the data may be interpreted to rarify the construct of epiphany.

**The Amplification of Self/Changing Oneself**

A change in one’s perspective, or on a grander scale, one’s identity, can be perceived in two ways: either one feels that they have become who they were always meant to be, recognizing within oneself traits that have become manifest; or alternatively, one feels that they have been reborn, taking on new and unfamiliar perspectives that seem more suited to one’s current circumstances. Epiphany experiences can be the vehicle for both types of transformation. In the first excerpt, Luke explains that his epiphany has helped him rediscover himself, and that epiphanies serve to reveal one’s underlying character.
I gained myself, my true self. I lost my false self…you’re thinking about things, and then you’re thinking about things, and thinking will only take you so far. All of a sudden, something happens. You’re not thinking about it, you understand it. Your understanding of yourself broadens. I don’t think you have epiphanies that are separate from who you are…Conversion experiences don’t change your personality. It builds your character. You become who you were meant to be in the first place.

(Lu, I, p. 19, 6–10)

In contrast, Anne was unsure about what impact her epiphany would have on her identity.

Will I be someone else, or will I be same? It’s kind of a little bit of a churning going on for me about what I’m going to be like through this process of letting go of the tears, and pain, and all that stuff, you know? So that’s a bit of a challenge. Who will I be in six months or a year after the dust has settled? (An, I, p. 2, 27–30)

Because the “old self” was inherently flawed, both Mandy and Sylvie credited their epiphanies with spurring the actions which ultimately transformed their identities.

Mandy, in losing over 75 pounds more than two years ago, felt that she escaped her mother’s fate and became physically, a new person, more able to participate in activities with her family, more involved in her children’s lives. Sylvie’s paradigm shift made her aware of her predisposition to the pattern of suicide in her family and helped to develop her stalwart resolve to choose to live (as well as her mother, her brother also completed suicide, and her father and sister have both attempted suicide). She claims that she accomplished this by deciding to live out loud, identifying and fighting perceived
injustices rather than suppressing them and being tormented by them as she had previously. This was for her a new way of responding and ultimately helped her escape an abusive relationship.

Perhaps the determinant of where one places the outcome of their epiphany on this dimension relates to whether or not significant changes to one’s belief system are necessary to cope with psychological turbulence. If existing personality traits are sufficient to manage the change in perspective that is brought about by epiphany, then maybe those traits become enhanced and take on new significance. On the other hand, if a novel situation is perceived to have no adequate familiar response, then a more comprehensive personality change may ensue.

*Private Experience/Public Experience*

There are many reasons why someone would choose to keep an epiphany private. Those who choose to share their experiences with family members, close friends, or the broader public risk cheapening the experience by inadequately expressing it, especially if the resulting transformation carries great personal meaning but is seen as having only marginal importance for others. Profound changes that come *out of the blue* may raise suspicions about the permanence and significance of the insights gained, and also illicit feelings of discomfort with the non-linear, mysterious nature by which they came about. That is why for some, merely articulating the experience detracts from its power (Davis, Lockwood & Wright, 1991). Furthermore, field testing the new self that emerges from an epiphany requires confidence, and indeed evidence that the insights gained are truly valid. This is at the very least an emotional risk, and potentially a perilous test of one’s faculties, because if the conclusions reached are perceived by others as incorrect, inappropriate, or
anti-social, then what should one make of such an earthquake in one’s psyche? It is as impossible to forget or ignore profound upheavals of our worldview and identity as it is to revert back to an older version of oneself. So electing to keep an epiphany experience private is an understandable choice. But what if the message received from the experience can have a positive influence on others, and the forcefulness and clarity of the insight buoy the confidence required to test out the new perspective in public? In that case, sharing the epiphany may feel like a moral imperative. In the data collected for this study, both types of responses, as well as a middle-road surfaced. Anne’s experience falls on the “private experience” end of the spectrum. Since she did not feel that she was able to adequately express the significance of her experience, she confessed to having some regrets that she had shared it with others.

A Private Experience ➤ A Public Experience

I really shouldn’t have talked to anyone about it because it really didn’t have any kind of resonance. I mean, my close, close friends, they knew it had resonance because they know who I am and what I do and all that stuff, but for some people it didn’t, and I wish in some ways I had kept it very, very private. (An, I, p. 9, 38–41)

Louise’s experience falls closer to the middle of the spectrum. Following her epiphany, she tried to explain her understanding of the implications of her friend’s death to others, but felt that they were too preoccupied to take notice.

A Private Experience ◀ A Public Experience

I tried to explain all this to my friends, but they were too busy mourning Dave when instead they should be celebrating his last gift. Even now, when I think about that
moment of clarity, when the whole puzzle clicked together, I get butterflies in the pit of my stomach and a small smile on my face. (Lo, p. 4, 31–34)

Luke’s experience clearly falls closer to the “public experience” end of the spectrum. Through his work, he has tried to convey the importance of his epiphany to others.

A Private Experience  ↔  A Public Experience

Whatever I learned from my conversion experience, my epiphany, call it what you want, there’s a growing, burning desire to share it with others and set them free. Not everybody’s going to becoming free together. But I’m trying to get them to understand that the stories in the bible are metaphorical wisdom. (Lu, I, p. 16, 35–36)

Making epiphanies public can have both beneficial and destructive consequences. In sharing his epiphany, Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, has been able to help thousands overcome addictions. Conversely, mystical visions have motivated tyrants and leaders of cults to recruit unwitting subjects to their nefarious causes throughout history (Greeley, 1974). However, since previous research into the phenomenon suggests that almost everyone experiences at least one epiphany in their lives (Athens, 1995; Wuthnow, 1978; Maslow, 1962), instances where the event carries societal implications are most likely the exceptions. More commonly, the most meaningful outcomes of epiphanies are personal; i.e., they reveal one’s self-identity, inform future actions, and change one’s perspective and relationship with the world. As such, the decision to divulge the experience must inevitably be an individual choice.

Risks carry the potential for both gain and loss. In sharing their epiphany stories, all the participants to this study have chosen to make their epiphanies a public experience, perhaps with the hope that in relating their experiences, others can benefit. Insights shared
can promote a greater understanding about the nature of the phenomenon, and maybe help others to be more open to experiencing the life-validating and exciting event for themselves.

Alternatively, the participants’ motivations may not have been so altruistic. While I was collecting data, at times I sensed that what some of the participants were hoping for by sharing their epiphany stories with me was a better understanding of what epiphanies are for themselves perhaps as another way of “unpacking” their own experiences. One reason for this conjecture is that in at least a portion of each interview, all the participants attempted to dialogue about, or offer their thoughts on what epiphanies are, even though they were never specifically asked to do so. Indeed, it could be surmised that the reason they volunteered to participate in the study in the first place was because they had some personal curiosity about the phenomenon. Yet in doing so they took the chance that their confidentiality would be breeched, that their experiences would be misunderstood, that they would be judged unfavourably, and that their testimonies would be used to serve some unintended purpose. Regardless of whether or not the participants’ internal motivations for sharing their stories were altruistic or out of self-interest, optimistically, this thesis can accomplish both intentions without realizing any of the hazards. By sharing various epiphany experiences with a wider audience, I hope that participants and others can find some useful insight into the phenomenon that helps them contextualize their experience without demystifying it. By informing participants of the known risks beforehand, asking for their consent to participate, and endeavouring to maintain confidentiality, I hope to honour the trust that the participants of this study have bestowed upon me.
**Deductive, Rational/Inductive, Emotional**

*Discordia concors*—harmonious discord: harmony or unity gained by combining disparate or conflicting elements (www.m-w.com/dictionary/discordia_concors)

Are we lost in the woods in this attempt to explain the phenomenon of epiphany? We have walked among the trees (the data), but can they be recognized together as a forest (an elucidation of the phenomenon)? Similar to the literary use of metaphor, I propose that one way to interpret epiphanies is as psychological *metaphorical moments* wherein unrelated thoughts or ideas connect in particularly meaningful ways. Consider Jordan’s interpretation of what an epiphany is:

> Consciousness is the ability of the brain to sort sensory experience and their cultural references into meaningful patterns. Deductive reasoning depends on the ability of the brain to organize those patterns in some logical way. Inductive reasoning depends upon the brain’s ability to improvise alternative patterns from the same data. Creativity is an inductive, not a deductive process. An epiphany is that point at which an improvised pattern is recognized as having exceptional meaning. (Jo, E)

Simple examples of this interpretation include being able to relate to a metaphor such as *love is blind*; or getting the punch line of a joke: Jane—“What’s for dinner?” Tarzan—“Finch and chimps”; or the moment one recognizes the paradoxes in an Escher drawing. The difference between these examples and true epiphanies is their effect on one’s perspective thereafter. While getting a joke and being able to relate to a metaphor may be satisfying in the short term, epiphanies have more significant, longer-term consequences. Therefore, I would add that an epiphany can be thought of as the point of understanding where disparate thoughts, ideas, and experiences that have previously been deductively
processed and organized into our memory come together inductively in a way that is particularly resonant, so that appreciable and forceful changes to our perspectives, and occasionally our identities occur. It is understandable that such an event would be associated with strong emotions. Epiphanies then, may rely on both deductive, rational processes, and inductive, emotional processes. Deductive processes lay the groundwork in the form of *memes* (packets of facts and experiences sorted into cultural contexts) and creative, inductive processes improvise new patterns amongst these memes. The significance of the experience may be augmented by the emotions associated with such extraordinary revelations. Indeed, examples of the varying degrees of influence that deductive processes and inductive processes play in the meanings that the participants’ assigned to their epiphanies can be found throughout the data. For instance, it makes sense that deductive processes associated with death and danger result in new perspectives about the value of life and living. When Harry escaped unscathed from a car accident which permanently handicapped his mother, he gained a new appreciation for the value of living one’s life to the fullest:

Deductive, Rational    →    Inductive, Emotional

This “happening” was a light-up moment from that scene where I realized, in the air, that I got out of that car alive, and to be in that hospital realizing that my mom was damaged for life, and I just had a scratch on my hand. I started to appreciate each day. Today, I would still say that this experience was the starting point of a kind of new experience. It has made me feel more alive and adventurous about life itself.

(Ha, Q. p. 4, 15–19)
Jill enrolled in singing lessons for fun, to explore a new hobby, and get to know her voice. She chose a Bette Midler song to sing for her final lesson. Initially, she took a rational approach in preparing for her performance by concentrating on the technical aspects of the song such as proper phrasing, pitch, and volume. However, what ensued was an out-of-body experience wherein she became deeply moved by the beauty of her own voice. This was an inductively perceived, emotionally intense interpretation of an event that was originally approached rationally.

Deductive, Rational \(\bigcirc\) Inductive, Emotional

…and tears rolled down my cheeks, as they do now, to know that a really beautiful voice had been inside me and that I didn’t know was there. I remember finishing the song and just holding my newfound awareness to myself. That awareness has nourished me a great deal since that time. At some level, I needed to know that there was something beautiful inside, and the experience and your acknowledgement of it filled that need. I often think about that time and still feel the immensity and simplicity of it all. (Ji, L)

Sometimes, the deductive, rational processes that form the backdrop of an epiphany are less significant to the experience than the inductive processes that form the connections between unrelated thoughts. Jacob’s epiphany seemed from the outset, incongruent with his mood and surroundings.

Deductive, Rational \(\bigcirc\) Inductive, Emotional

I was in Banff and I remember crossing the road, and having, for the first time in my life, an overwhelming sense of peace. It wasn’t the mountains, and it wasn’t the….I don’t even dig mountains. I dig lakes and stuff like that. I like Canadian Shield. I
remember having this overwhelming sense of peace like I’d never experienced before. Everything was just gone. And then, immediately afterwards thinking I was gonna [sic] die. Thinking, this is what happens to you before you die. And I remember, like, expecting the, “honk, honk, pow!”’, like when you get hit by a bus. And I remember thinking how morbid I was, that, why couldn’t I have just embraced that and revelled in it for longer than just two seconds? And what I eventually thought to myself was, to feel this good must be what it means, before you meet your maker, sort of thing.

(Ja, I, p. 5, 32–42)

The interpretation of epiphanies as being metaphorical moments where the interplay between deductive and inductive processes leads to new perspectives is not one that I found while reviewing the literature related to this topic. Nevertheless, it is a perspective that I believe enhances our understanding of epiphanies; the moment two or more unrelated things connect to create a sudden and complete understanding of a thought or concept.

Deliberate/Serendipitous

“Do you have the patience to wait ‘til your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving ‘til the right action arises by itself?” –Tao Te Ching (n.d.)

Epiphanies can be things that are wished for, even though the mechanism for their arrival is unplanned. Bits of related facts and ideas may suddenly tumble into recognizable forms that although surprising in the instant, are really just natural, logical reactions to prevailing circumstances. An uncomfortable situation or a personal crisis may require some sort of adaptive reorganization of perspective or identity, which when perceived as a cascade of pre-existing understandings that result in an epiphany, is more akin to
traditional ways of learning after all. On the other hand, in cases where an epiphany occurs spontaneously, without prevailing circumstances that require a novel perspective or a change in identity, conceivably the epiphanic response has more innate, intuitive origins. Dreams, hallucinations, psychotic breaks and the stimulation of the *fight or flight* response are examples of sources of epiphanies that can be thought of to have such intuitive origins. The following excerpts of participants’ testimonies are further examples of how the epiphany experience can be viewed as occurring along contrasting dimensions.

Those that cannot rationally reconcile events and circumstances that have personal significance have a greater need for a resolution than others. Therefore, they may unwittingly be primed for an epiphany despite being surprised by its form, or the timing of its arrival. For this reason it makes sense that personal crises are common trigger events for the experience. In this context, an epiphany may be the product of a search for solace. In the following excerpt, Sylvie reflects on how her mind was primed for an epiphany by the circumstances that led up to it.

**Deliberate** ← ○ → **Serendipitous**

You know, it’s awful when anybody kills themselves anyway, but for a mother to do it on Mother’s Day…there’s something more than a casual connection. So did I want an epiphany? Did I expect one? No. But I was expecting to find a place, or an explanation…It’s like every human has the potential to have an epiphany but you have to be fertile, or receptive. And, you could also say we have to be ripe too. And so that’s very apt, and if you want to pursue the metaphor, the time between my mother’s death and the epiphany was preparing the ground, and emotionally I was vulnerable,
receptive, didn’t have the barriers up. Psychologically, the same thing, vulnerable, open, whatever. (Sy, I, p. 12, 15–18)

Others also see their epiphanies as occurring after rational attempts to reconcile personal circumstances fail, but instead of expecting, or hoping for a resolution, they enhance their receptiveness for an epiphanic solution by letting go of the initial problem, for instance, by meditating. Katrin and Sylvie shared their thoughts on how we can become primed for non-specific epiphanies to occur that are independent of prevailing life circumstances.

Deliberate 〇 Serendipitous

Certain things help me connect to it, like deep-tissue massage, gardening, praying, listening to live music, etc. (Ka, Q, p. 4, 19–20)

It’s a process, not a product. And I think that the concept of epiphany could also be looked at as a process, because I really believe that you can’t have an epiphany, unless you’re receptive. I think we miss a lot more epiphanies than we actually receive. So, an epiphany is a product at the moment that it happens, but it’s a process as well, because it extends into the future, and I think you’ve built up to it in the past.

(Sy, I, p. 17, 12–17)

Deliberate 〇 Serendipitous

“Whenever the internal dialogue stops, the world collapses, and extraordinary facets of ourselves surface, as though they had been kept heavily guarded by our words.” –Don Juan Matus (Castenada, 1990)

The idea of physiological origins or even cultural and genetic predispositions to experiencing epiphanies is documented in both neurological (Rachmandran, 1993), and
ethnobotanical studies (Davis, 1996; Castenada, 1990, 1991). Vision quests and psychedelic drugs are common triggers for epiphanies with arguably more intuitive origins. According to the London Times (2009), one of the world’s fastest growing religions, Santo Daime, a mixture of Christianity, South American shamanism and African animism centers many of its important rituals around the hallucinogenic drug, *ayahuasca*, which when consumed produces almost universally, an immediate sense of connectedness with the world.

Despite a lack of participant testimony to corroborate the point, the literature indicates that epiphanies can occur through both sustained focus on a question or problem, or by letting go altogether and allowing subconscious processes take over. This is another example of how the interplay of dissimilar qualities exists within the phenomenon of epiphany.

**Incremental Effect/Epochal Effect**

What is the difference between an epiphany that one recognizes as being an extraordinary and poignant event in one’s life, but one that remains simply a curious moment of clarity or a stepping stone amongst many trigger events towards a new and meaningful understanding; and an epiphany that causes epochal, wholesale changes in behaviour, or immediately alters one’s life path altogether? Perhaps the degree of impact that an epiphany imparts on one’s perspective or identity, and the timeframe that it takes to do so are the features that best distinguish epiphanies from other types of vital moments such as peak-experiences, wonder events, and certain types of transformative learning. This is to say that the less permanent or significant an epiphanic event is perceived to be, and the longer it takes to have a noticeable effect on one’s perspective and behaviour, the
harder it is to qualify as a psychological epiphany. According to Miller and C´de Baca (1994), distinguishing between epiphanies and ordinary experiences depends on factors such as the magnitude of the perceived changes and the clarity of recall. Similarly, Jarvis (1997) argues that fundamentally, a psychological epiphany involves a sudden change that leads to a profound transformation through the reorganization of one’s identity and beliefs. Based on the relatively small number of epiphany stories I have collected, I contend that epiphanies that are acted upon in a relatively short time span are more easily recognizable manifestations of the phenomenon than epiphanies that are reflected upon without initiating a discernable behavioural response. The following is Sylvie’s response to a question posed regarding the positive and negative outcomes of her epiphany. In it, she reflects on how processing the meaning of her epiphany spurred into a sweeping course of action.

Incremental Effect     ⬇    ⬅️    Epochal Effect

When I finally knew what I had to do; there’s knowing, there’s learning, and then knowing what you have to do, and I find it had to filter down into my heart, and my essence of being so I could find the courage and strength, the means, you know? There’s the knowing and then there’s the doing, and the doing was very, very, difficult because I became in physical danger, and I ended up eventually just putting my cat and my stereo and my saddles in the car and just driving away…So I just had to run. It was my only way of doing this. And so I lost a great deal. But I gained an awful lot.

(Sy, I, p. 14, 17–22)
Luke felt compelled to action as a result of his epiphany. He decided to resign from his job, however, he did not leave it with an alternative calling in mind. Consequently, he was unsure about what he would do next.

Incremental Effect ↔ Epochal Effect

A sudden understanding; a lot of people get those things. I guess, I don’t think epiphany is a good word for me. Because, it’s like I’m looking for something larger, it’s not just one moment, a one-shot deal in your life that says, O.K., I’ve discovered the theory of relativity, I think I’ll go out for a beer. There’s more to it than that. And I think many people get them and just don’t understand them so they brush them off. Or perhaps they don’t want to look at them too closely, so they don’t give them any authority…So part of my next challenge is not quite knowing what it is. And I’ve learned over the years that you can’t force that. Things evolve and sometimes you have to leave one thing, and sight of that shore before you can discover where you are going. Churches are terrible at that. People come back to shore. I want it to be like that O.K.? Things change, the world changes. You’ve got to lose sight of the stuff before you can find something new.

(Lu, I, p. 8, 1–8)

Incremental Effect ↔ Epochal Effect

Although they may be perceived as extraordinary events while they are occurring, epiphanies that meet utilitarian goals are difficult to differentiate from traditional ways of learning, as when one suddenly comes to the solution for a math problem that they have been thinking about over time. For this reason, I felt that Shelley’s experiences in particular, were difficult to classify as epiphanies.
My epiphanies are never of the spiritual or mythical type. They are more a revelation of sorts, or a complete understanding of a thought or concept that suddenly occurs to me sometime afterwards. An example of this is from any play on words such as the Shell sign for oil. It took me over 12 years to realize the shape of the logo was a shell. Arid extra dry deodorant, I one day realized that arid was very dry and that it was an awesome play on words. (Sh, Q, p. 4, 1–9)

When the after-effects of epiphanies are unrecognizable, transient, or pervade a relatively small part of one’s life, the criterion of significance becomes more difficult to meet. One of Jordan’s epiphanies involved a profound spiritual dream about a marriage ceremony performed by Thai monks. His interpretation of the meaning of the dream was that every action has not one, but many acceptable responses. Although he was able to recall the substance of the dream and its emotional impact on him in considerable detail decades after it had occurred, he acknowledged that the lack of discernable effect on his worldview made him unsure of whether or not it qualified as an epiphany.

When the monk’s dream ended…I remembered the experience, but it had no transformative effect on me, none. It’s the classic definition of a sartori. This is enlightenment, but there is no enlightenment. I woke up the same guy.

(Jo, I, p. 14, 38–41)

Even though epiphanies that motivate action may illustrate the phenomenon in question more clearly, I have found no evidence to show that the merit of such actions is greater than actions born from more traditional, slower and less dramatic forms of decision-making. Actions that happen as a result of incremental changes in one’s perspective through reflection and introspection over time are harder to analyze because the process is
less noticeable. The difference then, between epiphanies that are reflected upon versus epiphanies that are acted upon, may simply be the pace at which one’s understanding of an epiphany matures into a tangible result. Cranton (2006) argues that all types of transformative perspective shifts happen incrementally because even in cases where trigger events are identifiably abrupt, a period of critical reflection, discourse, and a revision of assumptions must ensue before a lasting impact can occur.

*Having personal meaning/Having universal meaning*

When I first thought about what we learn from epiphanies, I considered the idea that epiphanies may have some external, supernatural causation. I entertained the possibility that there was some kind of broadcast of wisdom that was being sent at a frequency that most people could not usually perceive, but when someone had an epiphany, it meant that they had temporarily tuned into this broadcast, and from it gleaned deep truths or profound wisdom. If it were so, then the ability to have epiphanies might represent an evolution in consciousness (Miller, 2004), a deliberately laid path to enlightenment, potentially accessible to all. One could expect that the meanings attained from such externally engineered epiphanies would carry universal importance or raise our collective wisdom through a series of individual intuitive leaps towards self-actualization. Despite the fact that some participants did indeed report that there were mystical qualities to their experiences, investigating and verifying such supernatural links to the phenomenon would be difficult and was not a consideration within the scope of this study. Nevertheless, leaving the question of external causation aside, pointing out cases where epiphanies have led to global understandings that benefit others is considerably easier. Multiple examples were found even within my small sample size. Similarly, cases where epiphanies have led
to profound personal revelations that have been individually transformative are also quite common. In the following excerpt, Ryan describes the message he derived from his epiphany. He was cogently reminded of a universal truth; that despite our modernity we are still pawns of nature.

Having personal meaning ↔ Having universal meaning

Previously, I had an appreciation for the forces of nature— I had been carried out to sea by a strong current; I had been made to feel small by powerful storms, but then, at that moment, I realized, and would say to this day, I carry the sensation that nature’s awesome power must be respected, especially when embarking on a wilderness adventure. (Br, Q, p. 4, 36–41)

Modern life can at times create the illusion that through civilization and technology, we have transcended the forces of nature to the point that in our day-to-day experience, nature is predictable and forgiving. Thus, when we experience first-hand, a stochastic natural event that has tragic consequences, as Brian did when he found himself powerless to rescue a tourist from a fast-moving, glacial river, we can be primed for an epiphanic reminder of the sheer power of the elements. This visceral reminder of our scale in the face of nature is a universally relevant understanding that continues to be as closely tied to the human experience today, as it was for our earliest ancestors.

Similarly, Jacob realized through his epiphany, that destructive forces are harbingers of new growth. This universally significant understanding includes events on a grand scale such as mass extinctions that pave the way for new forms of life to emerge, and forest fires that fertilize the ground for new waves of succession; and phenomena on a smaller scale as when one’s character flaws in one context prove to be character strengths in another, e.g.
anger and passion. Jacob came to the understanding that his conflict-oriented nature, a quality that he hates about himself, is also a gift because it often leads to more genuine and meaningful relationships by stripping pretences from social interactions.

Out of destruction comes life. Thunderbird creates the thunders and the storms that bring the rains and heal and all of these sorts of things, and it was this way I start to see myself, like the things I hated about myself that you asked in the beginning, my ability to be mean with my words, to fight with my words is a hard gift…If you can disintegrate, positively disintegrate, and then reintegrate at a high level of understanding, a higher level of enlightenment, then it’s worth it. (Ja, I, p. 9, 26–35)

Katrin’s epiphany resulted in the understanding that her thoughts shape her reality. Although this understanding has been personally significant to her, she sees universal meaning in it as well in recognizing that our collective perception of reality is also dependent upon a combination of individual thoughts. Below, she describes how she thinks about this revelation.

Having personal meaning ← ○ → Having universal meaning

I call it being awakened to the oneness of everything, knowing suddenly the meaning of everything, or “seeing the matrix.” Sometimes I think of it as knowing the divine or being aware of God in every moment, but I don’t have traditional notions of what God is. My epiphany made me aware that every thought I have affects my reality.

(Ka, Q, p. 4, 2–7)

Along the same line, Dianne made the connection between her decision to eat meat and the implications it had on other creatures.
It hit me with great force that I was part of the process. It was deplored. For decades I
had wanted to stop eating other creatures but could never give that up. I talked the talk
but…Now suddenly my behaviour and my philosophy connected. (Di, Q, p. 4, 4–6)

For Jill, the meaning she assigned to her epiphany was strictly personal. Hearing her
own voice improved her self-esteem and gave her a new-found self-confidence around
both her speaking and singing abilities.

Having personal meaning → Having universal meaning

I heard a voice that was so beautiful, so clear and clean, like the sound you hear when
you tap a crystal bowl... I realized the voice belonged to me. And from that moment, I
have been forever changed around my voice. I hear it on an answering machine, and I
am no longer embarrassed because I know that behind the um’s and ah’s is a voice that
has a beauty beyond words. (Ji, Q, p. 4, 13–20)

Correspondingly, Mandy’s dramatic weight loss, and Sylvie’s decision to live despite the
pattern of suicide in her family, both resulted from epiphanies that had more personal
rather than universal significance. Although the value of the epiphanies to those that
experience them first hand does not seem to be influenced by whether or not the epiphany
has individual or universal significance, I suspect that learning through epiphanies that
have more universal themes is more conducive to an educational application of the
phenomenon, especially in a context where the experience is shared with those who have
not had an epiphany themselves.

Summary

Recognizing the chiaroscuro of semblances that epiphanies can take enhances our
understanding of the phenomenon itself. That is why an analysis strategy using six spectra
of contrasting dimensions was employed. In doing so, the following characteristics of epiphanies became apparent.

First, epiphanies can expose previously hidden character traits as well as develop new ones depending on the prevailing circumstances behind the event, and whether or not there is a need to adapt to unresolved crises.

Second, the decision to share the experience is difficult, not only because it is hard to articulate, but also because it is fraught with risks that can potentially devalue the experience. However, deciding to share an epiphany with others can help one make sense of their experience, and can potentially benefit others as well.

Third, epiphanies can be thought of as metaphorical moments where deductively organized thoughts, ideas, and experiences are sometimes creatively or inductively rearranged into new understandings that are particularly meaningful and consequently alter one’s perspective on something or everything thereafter. The dramatic nature of an epiphany is often linked with an emotional component, which can augment the authority of the meaning assigned to it.

Fourth, some people’s epiphanies can be interpreted as logical reactions to existing conditions. Since conclusions drawn from these types of epiphanies share characteristics with traditional forms of learning, they are harder to discern from the climax moment of a gradual instant than other types of epiphanies such as dreams and hallucinations, which are less obviously linked to one’s external state of affairs.

Fifth, epiphanies that result in a discernible change in perspective or behaviour are more easily recognized as epiphanies than those do not (or have not yet). Although epiphanies that lack an immediate, concomitant change in behaviour can be confused with
other types of vital moments, the process of reflection may in fact just be part of a slower progression that eventually results in action. Therefore, actions that are an immediate and direct result of epiphanic experiences should not necessarily carry greater value or authority than epiphanies whose consequences are as yet unrealized.

Finally, epiphanies can reveal truths which are both personally and universally significant. The scope of significance of an epiphany does not seem to affect the value or importance of the event to the person that experiences it.

Presumably, a multitude of other dimensions in addition to the six analyzed here could also have been considered. The point is that despite the copious possible manifestations that epiphanies can take, they can, nevertheless be understood as a coherent phenomenon if we are willing to accept that many of their characteristics are dimensional rather than dichotomous. This dimensional approach to the investigation of the construct of epiphany contributes to the ongoing negotiation and acceptance of the meaning of the term. In this way, our understanding of the phenomenon grows. In the next chapter, the relevance of these findings to the field of education is reflected upon.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The privilege of reading and hearing my participants’ accounts of their epiphanies was a highlight of conducting this study. What was invariably a difficult thing for the participants to articulate and even more so to share, was for me a fascinating and evocative view into some of their most intimate thoughts, experiences, and feelings. What I learned as a result was that the phenomenon of epiphany is not easily explainable even when distilled into a psychological construct with educational applications separate from the literary, clinical and religious contexts in which epiphanies have been studied in the past. Nevertheless, through this study some new understandings about epiphanies have emerged, and earlier findings about the phenomenon have been both reaffirmed and brought into question.

Since epiphanic episodes are without question extraordinary and exciting ways to learn about oneself and the world, the educational applications of the phenomenon are intriguing, especially in a culture where through technology, we are increasingly more apt to share our experiences with others over the internet, but at the same time, because of ubiquitous advertising and other types of information overload, we are prone to letting outside interests define our wants and needs. Does modernity signal new possibilities for the epiphanic phenomenon or will the age-old applications of epiphanies such as they appear in rites of passage, exorcising one’s demons, and gaining self-awareness persist? It is tempting to muse on what the next steps of this research would entail, and where the implications of the findings might lead. These are the themes of the final chapter.
The first part describes what it was like to collect epiphany stories from a researcher’s point of view and reflects on the effectiveness of the methodology for teasing out the essence of the phenomenon of epiphany. The second part summarizes some of the more significant findings. The third part considers what potential applications epiphanies may have in the field of education, and what sorts of changes could be made to learning environments to enhance the odds that students can experience and learn from them. In the final part of the chapter some directions for future research into the phenomenon are suggested.

**Methodological reflections**

One of the most challenging parts of conducting this study was to capture the attention of a wide audience of unfamiliar potential participants and motivate them to respond to a succinct written example of an epiphany to which they could relate their own experiences. My repeated requests for a meeting with an editor from the local daily newspaper to discuss running an article about epiphanies were flatly ignored. Soliciting participation through a single-issue, quarter-page advertisement in a free, weekly, community newspaper, and posting flyers throughout the community, felt like a poor second choice. What I initially, optimistically envisioned would be a flood of responses turned out to be a trickle. I had considerably more success and enjoyment in sensitizing potential participants to the study through conversation. After corresponding with nearly fifty potential volunteers, and distributing an equal amount of questionnaires, sixteen people ultimately participated, which for a qualitative study of this scope, is a relatively good response.

Even though I made efforts to give participants choice in how they wished to respond to the survey, I felt awkward as I read through the first completed questionnaires that I
received. I had a sense that in providing a standard, photocopied questionnaire complete with Likert style answer keys, I had cheapened my participants’ profound personal experiences by forcing them to recount sensitive and private information through a form letter without any immediate feedback in return. Although interesting data emerged from each questionnaire, the face-to-face interviews were a far superior instrument for collecting rich data on the topic. The epiphany stories I read seemed comparatively sterile to the stories that I heard in the interviews. The value of gauging facial expressions, feeling the ebbs and flows of emotional emphasis that accompanied the testimony, and having the ability to ask clarifying questions and exchange thoughts and ideas throughout the process, could not be overstated. Furthermore, I left each interview tired, but also invigorated with the sense that each of us had been in someway rewarded. For me, it went beyond the obvious prize of having collected good data for my study. I felt that I had made a personal connection with each of the interviewees, and that we had spoken as if we had known each other for much longer than we had. I think this feeling was mutual in every case. I believe that some degree of bonding is an inevitable spin-off of the emotional intensity of sharing such deeply personal experiences face-to-face. Therefore, were I to repeat this study, I would endeavor to collect all of my data through interviews.

**Significant findings**

For a phenomenon that is so well known that most people are not only familiar with the word but can give an example of its occurrence in their own lives, the task of summarizing what it means to have an epiphany is a remarkably difficult endeavor. The sixteen examples of epiphany that were analyzed for this study were so different from one another that many of the foundational pieces required to build a comprehensive answer to the
thesis question are still unclear. For instance, there were no particular attributes that stood out as being similar amongst those that volunteered to share their experiences, so identifying a personality type, or a demographic segment that is more susceptible to experiencing the phenomenon is impossible based on the results of this relatively small study. But the lack of a clear answer to the question regarding who has epiphanies, recurs in other, larger studies as well (e.g., Athens, 1995; Liang, 2001; Maslow, 1962; and Wuthnow, 1978).

The circumstances that lead up to epiphanies also appear to be quite variable. Despite attempts made to group trigger events under themes, it is apparent that an unwieldy number of categories would have to be devised to capture all the situations that could elicit an epiphany. The only trend found that related to trigger events is that some type of crisis formed the backdrop for many of those who chose to share their stories. The role that epiphanies can play in sorting out inner chaos through abrupt transformational change is one that has been identified in previous research too (e.g., Denzin, 1989; Frankl, 1973; James, 1902; and Mezirow, 1991).

Oddly, there was an absence of at least one, and sometimes all three of the following archetypical characteristics of the phenomenon in the data that were collected for this study: a) that it occurs out of the blue; b) that it is suddenly transformative, and c) that it presents itself without one’s bidding. This finding throws into question how serendipitous and non-volitional the experience actually is and suggests that in many cases, the epiphany experience is not a singular episode because the after-effects of the initial event extend far into the future.
The meanings assigned to epiphanies were as wide-ranging as the trigger events that spawned them. The overarching themes that were used to report results related to the outcomes of epiphanies included such notions as epiphanies can reveal one’s true character through maturation or transformation; they play a role in adaptation to novel circumstances by informing future actions; and, they permanently change one’s perspective and relationship with the world. However, in my opinion, these categories were far too general to adequately express the intricate interpretations that each participant conveyed when asked about the longer term consequences of their epiphanies. To me, the most truthful thing that can be said about the meanings assigned to epiphanies is that they are individually specific to both the person who experiences an epiphany and the circumstances behind their onset.

This leaves us with vague answers to fundamental questions about the epiphanic phenomenon. Who has epiphanies? Anyone can have an epiphany. What triggers an epiphany? Almost anything can trigger an epiphany. What do people learn from their epiphanies? People can learn all kinds of things from their epiphanies. Such indefinite conclusions are problematic for verifying, much less elucidating the experience. Nevertheless, if nothing else, some intriguing rejoinders related to the epiphany moment itself emerged to move us along on our path towards a better understanding of the phenomenon. Some of the most compelling testimony came when the participants were asked to describe how they perceived the moment when the epiphany event occurred. Here, there was widespread agreement that having an epiphany was an extraordinary event that was easily distinguishable from day-to-day experience; that disparate thoughts and ideas suddenly coalesced and jumped into the forefront of consciousness; and that
immediately thereafter, their perceptions about something or everything were permanently altered. For me, thinking about the epiphanic instant as a metaphorical moment, not unlike when one suddenly gets the punch-line of a joke or understands a work of art because incongruent ideas suddenly unite to create new meaning, was especially resonant. Remarkably, it was in response to this particular question that I found that the participants’ use of metaphors was most valuable to understanding what it felt like to have an epiphany: “You can’t unring that bell”; “…like a junkie’s joy”; placing the final piece into a puzzle that reveals the picture; and the tumbling dominoes image. Using the dimensional analysis strategy to highlight the importance of the interplay between deductive and inductive cognitive processes in improvising new and particularly meaningful patterns out of unrelated thoughts, ideas, and emotions was particularly helpful in offering a new way of understanding what it means to have an epiphany.

Evidently, the main challenge to achieving the goal of this thesis, namely, to extend our understanding of the phenomenon of epiphany, is to accept that there is no such thing as an archetypical epiphany. This is because the way in which an epiphany manifests itself is dependent not only on the prevailing circumstances unique to each of us, but also on how we interpret the event. Consequently, there are conceivably as many different types of epiphanies as there are people. However, despite not being able to draw conclusions about who experiences epiphanies, how they come about, or what meanings they convey, we can still recognize the phenomenon as a coherent entity mainly because there is agreement about many of its characteristics in the moment that it happens. Accordingly, providing examples and analysis of participants’ retrospective accounts of how they knew that they
were experiencing an epiphany is perhaps the most valuable contribution of this study to enhancing previous understandings of the phenomenon.

**Educational applications**

Despite giving us access to more information than ever before, the technological revolution threatens our ability to get to know ourselves. Increasingly constrained schedules combined with pervasive multi-media bombardment, which often achieves its intended effect of imbuing us with ideas of what we want, what we should do, and who we should want to become, mutes our own personal understanding of who we are. In order to prepare students to contribute to a democratic society, our education system has an obligation to help them become aware of, protect, and develop their self-identities independent of those identities imposed on them by commercial interests. The introspective nature of learning through an epiphany increases the volume of the inner voices that compel our attention to inner guidance. By coalescing disparate thoughts and emotions in an intense burst of experience, they help us get to know ourselves for who we really are. This is their value to education. However, the argument that knowledge is power, and information is knowledge, so there should be an increased emphasis on amassing information through increasingly concentrated study, challenges educators to hold space for the creative, imaginative, and introspective pursuits that create the conditions most conducive to having epiphanies. It can be argued that one of the greatest joys in learning comes from engaging the creative side of the brain as when one is solving a puzzle, or improvising in music, art or movement. Inductively reorganizing patterns from deductively organized memories is a mechanism for inducing epiphanies. But current curricula favour deductive, empirical methods to learn about and interpret our
environment. For example: biologists in describing forests, tend to report the number and type of trees, and the relationship of the trees to their supporting biotic communities and abiotic environments while ignoring the fact that knowing a forest is more than knowing its ecology. Along with knowing the ecology of a forest, understanding what a forest is also involves sensing the forest, experiencing oneself in the forest, and inductively reaching a new understanding of the reality of what a forest may be as a whole (Kuti, J., personal communication, September 26th, 2008). Epiphanies are potential vehicles for delivering such wisdom, which tends to carry over into other parts of our lives as well. An attempt to foster their occurrence in formal education settings can help to renew passion for learning, enhance our self-understanding, and inform our perceptions of what kinds of things are really important to us.

The challenges of incorporating epiphanies into formal education extend beyond simply creating the conditions to optimize their occurrence. A way must be found to set out a curriculum which is more tolerant of students getting lost along the path towards the learning goal, and then finding their own way. And even if freedom, time, and ideas are provided in a way that optimizes the conditions for epiphanies to occur, evaluating what exactly is learned remains an obstacle, especially if an epiphany does not occur or occurs and does not inspire a tangible product relevant to the curricular goal. Furthermore, allowing the space to do nothing seems antithetical to the hurried pace of learning that exists in traditional formal education settings today. But perhaps learning how to quiet the mind and to let things happen, as is the goal in Native American vision quests or certain Buddhist meditations, is precisely what we need in order to anchor us against the tides of information that threaten to flood our ability to understand ourselves from within.
In previous chapters, some of the conditions conducive to inducing epiphanies have been described. They include passive ways to achieve a mindset of receptive openness such as meditation, reflection, and dreaming, and active ways such as engaging one’s imagination through creativity, and aligning physical challenges with perceived competencies to encourage flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Practically, this involves advocating for an expansion of experiential and arts-based programming within public education that is somehow integrated with time for meditation and reflection. Furthermore, we could work harder to create learning environments that have fewer distractions and allow more time for reflection, spontaneity, and imagination at levels of schooling beyond kindergarten where these conditions, although threatened by the recent push towards early literacy, frequently exist already. The ideal outcome of such programming would be that students would gain great satisfaction from experiencing the dramatic changes in perspective spawned from a union of the maelstrom of ideas, feelings, and experiences that is an epiphany and, as a result, get to know themselves better through learning that is more personally meaningful.

**Implications for further research**

One next step in this research would entail seeking out the educational contexts where epiphanies are intentionally sought. By studying how to replicate the conditions that are most likely to yield epiphanic insights in various learning environments, perhaps programs could be developed that enhance student engagement with formal education. Since it is apparent that almost anyone can experience an epiphany, and that many sorts of activities and non-activities can trigger their occurrence, presumably, an epiphany plan can be adapted to suit many different subject areas. However, a further challenge for future
research involves learning how to direct the result of an epiphany to an intended outcome, for instance, to achieve a curricular goal.

Learning through epiphanies, especially those not born out of dire crises, can be exciting, hugely satisfying, and life-validating ways to augment the significance of a lesson. By causing a dramatic shift in our perspective on an issue, epiphanies reveal our inner selves, providing a touch-stone of our individuality within the world with which we interact. As such, in a moment of clarity, they have the ability to transform knowledge into wisdom, to provide a sense of interconnectedness within the grander scheme, and to contribute instant resolutions to persistent dilemmas seemingly irresolvable by less extraordinary means. The enigmatic nature of the epiphany experience remains one of the alluring mysteries of the human psyche. Learning more about the cognitive and physiological processes that elicit epiphanies can provide a neurological explanation for the phenomenon. But beyond that, the study of epiphanies is particularly intriguing because after more than a century of research, epiphanies still retain a veil that renders them mostly opaque to those who would seek to interpret the experience for others. Despite all that is known about the mind, epiphanies remain islands with mystical possibilities for consciousness within an expanding sea of explainable psychological phenomena.
REFERENCES


epiphany- 3a: (1) a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event), usually simple and striking (3) an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure b; a revealing scene or moment. (www.m-w.com/dictionary/epiphany)

If you have experienced an epiphany where your perspective on something, or everything has been changed in a short period of time by a singular, profound event, and are willing to participate in a Master’s thesis study of the phenomenon by sharing your experience in a questionnaire and/or an interview, please contact Thomas Olvet at 613-353-6072 or t_olvet@rideau.net.
Appendix B

FACULTY OF EDUCATION – A RESEARCH STUDY
INSTANT RESOLUTIONS – Learning Through Epiphanies

epiphany— 3a: (1) a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event), usually simple and striking (3) an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure b: a revealing scene or moment.
(www.m-w.com/dictionary/epiphany)

An example:
September, 1994.

Twenty-four years old and with $1,500 CDN in traveler's cheques in my back pack, I had just checked in to an Air Canada flight that would begin my year-and-a-half, solo journey through Australasia, India, and Nepal amongst other places. As I exchanged farewells with my mother, I felt anxious, excited, and sad. Sad because it felt like some kind of endpoint, and I knew that I could never adequately express the love and gratitude I felt towards her. When I walked through the security doors, it struck me that I was alone. Not only would I be alone for my travels, but I would always be alone, regardless of my relationships, associations, or location. My perspective on life changed right then. I realized that we are all responsible for our own happiness. It was not a distressing thought. It came with a wondrous feeling of a profound insight. All of a sudden, I felt another person take over. I became a calmer, more responsible person.

If you have experienced an epiphany, and are willing to participate in a study of the phenomenon by sharing your experience and answering a questionnaire, please contact Thomas Olvet, by phone at 613-353-6072 or electronically at: t_olvet@rideau.net
Appendix C
Letter of Information

Dear _____________________ ,                                      July 8th, 2008.

Thank you very much for volunteering to participate in this study. This letter is meant to inform
you of the purpose of your involvement in this study, as well as what to expect if you give your
consent to participate in it. I am a Master’s candidate at the Faculty of Education at Queen’s
University investigating what it means to have an epiphany. Your involvement in this study will
contribute to the research involved in completing my thesis by contributing data and testimony
regarding your personal experience(s) with the phenomenon of epiphany.

Should you agree to participate, your involvement will be completely voluntary, i.e, no
financial remuneration will be provided. You will be asked to fill out a four-page written
questionnaire that asks you to describe yourself, to briefly recount your epiphany, and to answer
some questions about how it has affected you. It should take between 30 and 60 minutes to
complete, and if you wish you may elect to answer part or all of the survey orally. Please note that
if you elect to answer part or all of the survey orally, your answers would be audio-taped. Some
volunteers will be asked to participate further in an audio-taped, hour-long, standardized, open-
ended interview at a mutually agreed upon time and place. During the interview, I will explore
the same kind information as was asked for in the questionnaire, except in greater detail. If applicable,
I would also ask for your further consent to have access to art, pictures, journal entries, or other
materials that may have been inspired by, or are otherwise relevant to your experience.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. To the extent
possible, I will keep your identity confidential throughout the process. You may withdraw from the
study at any time without consequence. Furthermore, you may refrain from answering any
questions that you do not wish to answer. The data will be used for my thesis and possibly
published for other academic papers. I would be happy to provide you with a copy of your
interview transcript and/or a summary of the completed thesis. All written records and data related
to the study will be shredded or deleted, and any audio-taped data will also be erased after a five-
year period.

If at this point, or in the future, you have any questions about this research, feel free to contact
me at (613) 353-6072, or by email at t_olvet@rideau.net. For further questions, concerns, or
complaints related to this study, you can also contact my thesis supervisor, Dr. Rena Upitis, by
phone at (613) 533-6212, or electronically at upitisr@educ.queensu.ca, as well as the Education
Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr.
Stephen Leighton at (613)533-6000 Ext. 77034, greb.chair@queensu.ca. Thank you once again for
volunteering your time. Please keep a copy of this letter for your personal records.

Sincerely,

Thomas Olvet
M.Ed Candidate
Queen’s University
Appendix D
Letter of Consent

Dear _____________________ ,

If you are willing to complete the questionnaire and participate in an interview with me, as described in the Letter of Information, please sign the following, and return one copy of this letter and signed consent to me before beginning your involvement.

*****

I have read the description of the study as stated in the Letter of Information and understand that the purpose of the study is to investigate the phenomenon of epiphany, and that my participation would entail completing a four-page survey either orally or in writing, and possibly engaging in an hour long, audio-taped interview at a subsequent time. I have been provided with a copy of this letter for my records. I also understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, that I may withdraw at any time, that the information I provide will be treated as confidential, and that my identity will be protected to the extent possible. Furthermore, I am aware that by completing the questionnaire and being interviewed, a paper copy of the questionnaire will be retained by the researcher, and the interview will be audio-taped in order that a transcription can be prepared, but the audio-tape will be erased, notes and questionnaires will be shredded, and computer files will be deleted after a five-year period. I understand that although portions of the information I provide may be viewed by the researcher’s supervisor, my identity will be protected by the use of a fictitious name, and all identifying features (e.g. name of workplace) will be removed.

I understand that I will not be expected to answer any questions that might make me feel uncomfortable or that I find objectionable. I am aware that I may withdraw from the interview at any time without pressure or consequence, and that in such a case, data that I have provided will be removed.

I understand that if I have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research, I can contact the researcher, Thomas Olvet at (613) 353-6072 or by e-mail at t_olvet@rideau.net, or his thesis supervisor, Dr. Rena Upitis by phone at (613) 533-6212, or electronically at upitisr@educ.queensu.ca, as well as the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Stephen Leighton at (613)533-6000 Ext. 77034, greb.chair@queensu.ca.

Participant’s name:

Signature: Date:

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return to Thomas Olvet. Retain the second copy for your records.
Appendix E

Participant Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer the following questions in the space provided. If you wish, you may answer part or all of the questions orally. If for any reason you would rather not answer any particular question, feel free to leave it unanswered.

Part A: Demographic Information

Name: _______________________________

Contact Information (including tel.# and/or e-mail address):
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

1. Gender: Male ___ Female ___

2. Age: ____

3. Racial/Cultural Background: _________________

3. Relationship status: _________________________

4. Last year of schooling completed: ______________

5. Current Occupation ___________________________

6. How satisfied are you with what you are doing for a living? (Circle one number)
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   Completely Satisfied Completely Dissatisfied

7. Approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your mate in terms of finances, recreation, demonstrations of affection, friends, philosophy of life, and ways of dealing with others. (Circle one number or ‘Not applicable’)
   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 or Not applicable
   Always agree Always disagree
8. Do you regularly do something where your concentration is so intense, and your attention is so focused on what you are doing that you become unaware of things that you normally would notice? (for example: other people, loud noises, the passage of time, being hungry or tired, physical discomfort)

Check one: yes ____ no _____

If you checked yes, please explain below.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

9. Self-Description Survey

Directions: Use this list of common human traits to describe yourself as accurately as possible. Describe yourself as you see yourself at the present time, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you are typically, as compared with other persons you know of the same gender, and roughly the same age. Please circle only one number in each line.

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<td>Athletic</td>
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**Part B: Questions about the experience**

**Directions:** For each question, please circle the number that best represents your reaction to the statements below using the following scale:

1 = strongly disagree  2 = disagree  3 = neither agree nor disagree  4 = agree  5 = strongly agree

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1. The experience was familiar in some way.
2. The event resolved a personal crisis.
3. The experience was spontaneous or triggered, not planned or structured.
4. The experience was intense.
5. The experience started suddenly.
6. I experienced joy and fulfillment.
7. My actions and thoughts felt new.
8. The event seemed like an emergency.
9. I had clear focus.
10. The event involved a personal value.
11. I was absorbed in what I was doing.
12. I felt a need to see the experience through to completion.
13. The event made me feel at one with something.
14. I had a strong sense of self.
15. Actions or thoughts just came out spontaneously.
16. I felt free from outer restrictions.
17. My thought process was clear.
18. I was aware of my own power.
19. My intentions were strong.
20. The event was non-motivated.
21. The experience left me with a sense of peace.
22. The event involved an understanding or expression that was personal.
23. I had a sense of personal responsibility.
24. The experience overwhelmed my other senses and thoughts.
25. The experience involved a feeling of interconnectedness with the environment.
26. The experience involved a ‘loss of self’.
27. The event was playful.
28. Differences were resolved.
29. Rules, motivation, and goals were built into the situation.
30. The event was fun.
31. The event had a spiritual or mystical quality.
32. The event was perceptual, rather than behavioural.
33. I was passively receptive to what was happening.
34. I enjoyed the company of another person or persons during the event.
35. I experienced a loss of space and time.
36. The event was an encounter with a person, or something outside of myself.
37. The event had great meaning for me.
38. Other people influenced the outcome.
39. The event was brief.
40. The experience was beyond words.
41. The experience was its own reward.
42. Afterwards, I knew right away that something had changed.
Part C: Epiphany Story
Please describe your epiphany in the space provided below. Feel free to use the back of this page, and the others as well if necessary.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
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How long ago did this incident occur? ______year(s) _______month(s)

*Thank-you for your participation. Please return the completed questionnaire in the self-addressed envelope provided.
Thank you for participating. Your responses to the questionnaire have identified you as a subject who fits the purpose of this study, and I would like to have the chance to ask you some questions more specific to your own experience. I would like to audiotape our conversation so that I can revisit what was said and so that I don’t miss anything. I ensure that our conversation will remain private, and that anything you say will be said anonymously. If at any time you wish to stop our interview, or would rather not answer a particular question, just say so, and I assure you that I will either move on, or stop as you wish. Do you have anything you want to ask me before we begin?

This interview will be done in three parts. In the first part, I am trying to answer the question, “What are people who have epiphanies like?” In the second part, I would like you to tell the story of your experience, and in the final part, I am going to be asking about how this experience has affected you.

PART I-Who has epiphanies?

_Self-Concept_

How would you describe yourself?

What kinds of activities are important to you?

What do you like and dislike about yourself?

_Personal Influences_

What has made you the person you are, in other words, the influences that have shaped your personality, your experiences, and your plans? Start as far back as you wish and tell me about the major influences you remember over your life until now.

_Goals and Challenges_

In your present life, what would you say your most important goal is?

What do you see as the main challenge that you face?

  _Probe: Occupational/personal_

_Motivation_

How did you come to see these as being the most important goals and challenges?

PART II- Epiphany Stories

What was happening just before your experience?

  _Probe: Where were you?_

  _Probe: What were you doing?_

How did the experience begin?
How did you feel during the experience?
Probe: What were you thinking?
Probe: Did you feel in control of the situation?
Probe: Did you hear, see, or feel anything special, like someone speaking to you, or seeing a light?

How did you know it was over?

Describe what happened after the experience?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

**PART III- Aftereffects**
Were you either expecting or hoping for something like this to happen?
Probe: Were you in any kind of crisis before the event?

What, if anything, did you gain or lose from this experience?

What did you learn?

How did it change you?
  Probes: Relationships, priorities, goals, perspective, behaviour

What was the value of the experience to you?
  Probe: How important was this experience in relation to, or in the formation of your overall life goals?

Does this experience have any other worth other than what you told me?

Do you know of anyone else who has experienced something similar?

Have the changes from this experience lasted, or have you tended to go back to how you were before?

Have you had any similar experiences before or since this one?

Given that my study is oriented towards exploring the educational applications of epiphanies, and your epiphany has had a significant impact on you, how, if at all, do you think your experience could benefit others?

Is there anything else you would like to add, that you think would be relevant to my study?
Appendix G
Table of Codes for Interpreting Participant Testimony

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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