

**MOMENTS MARKED: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE WAYS IN
WHICH WOMEN ARE CHOOSING TO MARK ASPECTS OF THEIR
RITE OF PASSAGE INTO MOTHERHOOD.**

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Abstract

Moments Marked: an exploration into the ways in which women are choosing to mark aspects of their rite of passage into motherhood.

This thesis frames the transition into motherhood as a rite of passage; proposes a new model for the rite of passage into motherhood based on the four seasons; and highlights the importance of contextual and specific ritual actions or sequences to navigate the transition.

Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with ten western women, from a middle class, Christian background, who had all become mothers through childbirth, are examined under three main headings.

Firstly, the women's experiences of their transition are explored using rites of passage theory as a lens. Although significant differences emerge, particularly from a gender perspective, important themes within the women's experiences are highlighted, including the nature of relationships; the importance of support; journaling; and the telling of birthing stories. The influences of contemporary cultural aspects such as the medicalization of childbirth and myths about motherhood are also taken into account.

Secondly, the field of ritual studies is explored in order to provide a framework in which to situate the women's ritualizing. Existing rituals associated with motherhood are analysed and gaps are identified in existing Christian liturgical resources for this area, specifically for ritual actions or sequences marking motherhood as a rite of passage, and for the expression of birthing stories. A working definition of ritualizing is also established and the research findings are divided according to time frame, exploring the women's ritualizing before birth, around birth and after birth.

Thirdly, spirituality in relation to childbirth and the transition into motherhood is explored and its place within healthcare and theological literature examined. Nicola Slee's theory on women's faith development is used to draw out some of the patterns that emerge from the interviewees' experiences, and the sacramental nature of birthing is considered.

The thesis concludes with a critique of implications and associated suggestions for those within a church or healthcare context with responsibility for the pastoral and spiritual care of women during their transition into motherhood.

Declaration

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Dedication

One of my Great Great Grandmothers, Mary Ann had four children, one of whom died in infancy.

Her daughter, Annie died in 1908 after giving birth to her first child, a daughter, who was given her mother's name, Annie.

Annie was brought up by her step mother Ethel and went on to have one child, a daughter called Ruth Margaret whom she brought up alone for the first five years, until her husband returned from war.

Ruth, daughter of Annie, was told that she couldn't have children but then became a birth mother and an adoptive mother. I am her daughter, Jill Margaret.

I am a step mother and a birth mother of twins. My daughter is called Ella Ruth and she was born in 2008.

This thesis is dedicated to all women whose motherhood has been left uncelebrated, whose transitions have gone unmarked and whose stories have not been told in the hope that in the future, alongside safer birthings and more opportunities for women, motherhood will be celebrated, transitions will be marked and stories passed on encapsulating the spirituality and sacredness of this most ancient rite of passage.

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Numerous people have supported and encouraged me in many different ways over the course of my research journey. In particular I would like to thank:

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Callum, Ella and Harris through whose patience, love and tutelage I continue to learn how to be a mum.

The Author

I began my ministerial training at Northern College, now part of Luther King House Educational Trust, which is affiliated to the University of Manchester, completing a B.A. (1st class) and M.A. (with distinction).

After ordination by the United Reformed Church, I served as the minister of a three church pastorate in Wiltshire from 2001-2006, during which time I was also chaplain to the Moderator of General Assembly and a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches.

Since I began this piece of research I have been part of a number of different research communities and presented papers at the inaugural Priesthood and Motherhood Conference (2011), the Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls (2011-15) and the BIAPT Student Day Conference (May 2014).

I have done my thesis on a part time basis, alongside continuing my ministry in a number of different ways, which have included: leading and developing material for a Sunday morning church preschool group, Godly Play training, developing and presenting school assembly material on the themes of memory, death and bereavement suitable for KS1 children, working with bereaved families to develop funerals that are suitable for children and working as a Relief Chaplain at Basingstoke Hospital.

Prologue

Before any conception, whether it be that of an idea or a baby, there is a prologue. There are threads that can be traced back well before the connections take place that go on to have implications for the future. Sometimes however, these threads become hidden, manipulated or ignored.

In Matthew's Gospel there is a carefully crafted genealogy connecting Joseph to some of the most influential figures within the Jewish tradition. We are also told that Mary was a virgin. Although these features of the story at one level tell us something about Mary and Joseph, their inclusion in the narrative owes more to identifying who Jesus is.

However, the story of the incarnation also reminds us of the way in which God is revealed within the lives of ordinary people. In the nativity we glimpse God through the embodied discomfort of a pregnancy, within the messy, impromptu nature of birth and alongside the turmoil that can often accompany a new family's existence.

The idea of exploring motherhood as a rite of passage and seeing if I could find any rituals to help women to navigate this transition first became a tangible thought for me in January 2009, but the threads that came together to form the conception of this idea began many years before that.

This opening chapter is an attempt to trace some of those threads in order to provide the context out of which this thesis emerged.

1.1 Narrative Thread¹

Like many little girls, I played with dolls when I was young. I fed them and changed their clothes whilst imagining myself to be their mum, all the while believing that one day when I grew up, I would become a real mother and have children of my own. In my mind having children meant *being* a mother, but I never really considered what *becoming* one would feel like or entail.

When I think back I realise now that I know very little about my own Mum's experience of becoming a mother. I know that her labour was difficult, but she said that it had all been worth it in the end, and I never really thought to ask any more! I have very happy memories of my childhood, and without realising it at the time I learnt a great deal from her about how to bring up a family, but I never knew what it took for her to become a mother; what it felt like, what her fears were, what made it special or what she had left behind. I wanted to ask her some of these questions during my pregnancy in preparation for my own transition into motherhood, but she died before those questions became pertinent to me, so they remain unanswered.

It was during my ministry, that I first became aware of some of the stories and experiences that can lie behind the birth of a child. One of my roles as a minister was to meet with parents who had approached the church asking for a christening or baptism for their child. In the majority of cases in my experience, this involved meeting with parents within the first year of a child being born.

As I quickly came to understand through these pastoral visits, a baby's arrival into the world is a catalyst for change. These changes are often fundamental and can have far reaching consequences for parents, and sometimes also for their extended family and friends. As a result, what began as an answer phone message requesting a date for a baptism often developed into an intense encounter with people at a major turning point in their lives.

Two stories in particular stand out for me from this period. The first belongs to Sarah and Michael who after having difficulties in conceiving, were delighted when their first child Thomas was born. A few years later Sarah was pregnant again, but from the start there

¹ The challenge and inspiration to interweave a prominent, personal narrative thread into my thesis came from Heather Walton, who I heard speak at a BIAPT Student Day Conference in May 2014. See also (Walton, 2014).

were medical concerns. Sarah became increasingly anxious during the pregnancy about the development of the baby and also about her own survival.

Thankfully she did survive the birth but the baby was immediately rushed into intensive care, and at one stage was not expected to live for more than a few days. After many stays in hospital and a number of operations Oliver was diagnosed with a condition that would continue to have an impact on his development and lifestyle for the rest of his days. Amidst all of the challenges and uncertainties of his first year, Sarah and Michael wanted to baptise Oliver.

The second encounter was with Charlotte and Steve who already had a toddler when I first met them and then discovered that Charlotte was pregnant again, this time with twins. Around the time of the twins' birth, Charlotte's Dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer and Steve began to experience stress related health problems which resulted in him needing to take a number of months off work. Again amidst all of this turmoil, Charlotte and Steve approached me regarding a baptism for the twins.

In relation to both of these situations, I felt a huge tension between what I had been told in private and what the couple wanted to share in public. Both couples expressed the desire to hold a celebratory occasion, and at one level I could completely understand that.

For Sarah and Michael, Oliver's baptism was a chance to pause in the midst of their chaos and be 'normal'. I sensed that they felt that they had been a 'special case' too many times already and the chance to do what many other parents of young children were doing, with no special mention or provision was important. Perhaps there had been too many tears and this was a moment of respite; an excuse to gulp in some fresh air before continuing their journey into an uncertain future.

Whilst I had empathy for them, however I also felt very awkward. From a pastoral perspective I felt as though I should be supporting and encouraging them to be more open about the challenges they faced as a family, rather than endorsing the idea that this should remain a private matter. Equally from a liturgical point of view, I felt uncomfortable about holding a public celebration which failed to mention or connect with some of the more difficult pastoral needs of the family.

In contrast to this, although Charlotte and Steve also wanted the day of their twins' baptism to feel like a celebration, they did agree to share some of the challenges that they were facing as a family with the congregation during the morning service. It was in fact a deeply moving experience that had a powerful effect on those who were present, but again I felt uncomfortable; this time because I had encouraged people who I knew to be vulnerable to share something in public that they had told me privately.

It was the tensions that I felt during these encounters and others like them, between what I knew to be the purpose of baptism and what I sensed people really needed or wanted that led me towards my initial research focus. I began to explore ceremonies other than baptism that people were choosing to hold to mark the birth of a baby, to see if these original, often personally created rituals more effectively reflected people's stories and emotions.

So far however, I had only ever encountered these experiences as stories from the point of view of a minister or latterly as a researcher. It took the birth of my own children for me to fully and knowingly participate in a birth story and understand it from a different perspective.

In March 2008 I gave birth to twins, and when I returned to my research in January of the following year I decided to ease myself back into it gently, by beginning to think about the kind of event we might create to mark their arrival. I thought I would start by recording any plans and ideas in my research journal, but as I began to write I discovered that I firstly felt the need to write down our birth story. I wrote at the time, "Rather than recounting recent conversations, I found myself going back to before the twins were born and describing a much longer and more detailed journey than I had previously envisaged" (Journal entry, 28 January 2009).

I initially tried to write the story as a letter to the twins, but as I wrote I began to realise that there were a number of different strands to the story. One was their birth story, a mixture of hopes, dreams and details of how and why they came into the world, but their arrival had had a ripple effect, with implications for other people too. It wasn't that our experience had been tragic, in fact it was fairly routine in comparison to the stories I have mentioned above, but the impact of their arrival was overwhelming for us at the time. In my journal I wrote: "There are things that I have not yet dealt with, and tensions in relationships that

are still very raw. These experiences are very real, and have cast shadows over parts of the journey for me" (Journal entry, 28 January 2009).

Through my desire to create an authentic ritual to mark the twins' arrival that was reflective of our journey as a family, I was reminded at a very personal level that it is not only in tragic circumstances that families are thrown into turmoil, and that every birth has wider implications for family and friends that often go unacknowledged.

At this point I was working on my research in small snatches of time when the twins slept, but within these brief interludes I forced myself to look more deeply at some of the issues that their birth had brought about or highlighted for me at a personal level. Again it wasn't because I had gone through anything out of the ordinary in terms of my own birthing experience, and at the time it would have been very easy for me to brush these issues aside. However, I also had a sense that if I didn't deal with them, then it would have implications later, both in terms of my relationships with the people around me and with regard to my own sense of self.

Feeling quite overwhelmed, I contacted Sue Gill who had previously agreed to work with us to create an event to mark the twins' arrival, suggesting that we postpone the date. Sue is an associate artist with *Dead Good Guides*, a company who seek to draw on their background in the Arts to create contemporary rites of passage.² I explained to her some of the reasons behind our decision, and almost as an afterthought asked if she had any ideas of what I could do to help me deal with how I was feeling. Sue wrote:

My first response is that this is something quite apart [separate], for you and could be quite intimate, could maybe happen quite soon ... in a quiet non-public way. Do you have a woman friend who is a mother and who might share this with you? In our culture the newly delivered mother doesn't get to go to rest in a special hut in the jungle, doesn't have her limbs anointed with oils and dishes of food brought to her by other women ...

I have a sense that it could be about some reflective time for you – even a day to yourself would feel a luxury at the moment, I've no doubt – when you could have a few hours in a calm setting, maybe to read, to write your journal, to consciously mark this

² Sue Gill and John Fox founded *Welfare State International*, a celebratory arts company in 1968. When it closed in 2006 they established *Dead Good Guides* which has built on their previous work with a particular focus on creating meaningful, contemporary rituals to mark important life stage transitions. More information about their work can be found at www.deadgoodguides.com

massive, most ancient rite of passage and to have some brief headspace to make those connections for yourself. Writing a letter to yourself maybe – to the Jill you used to be, or to your children in 10 years' time (Personal communication, 22 January 2009).

I found Sue's email immensely helpful in a number of ways; firstly, because she had taken my concerns seriously. Before this email my questions and doubts had felt like a personal failing and yet suddenly I began to see connections between my own experience and the stories of other women that I had heard. Indeed, I began to recognise them all as part of 'this massive, most ancient rite of passage' into motherhood. Her suggestion of a private ritual and the idea of involving other women who were also mothers in my healing not only made sense, but resonated with me at a very deep level.

I became interested in exploring the transition that women go through in becoming mothers, as a rite of passage. I also wanted to see if I could find any other rituals, aside from the ideas that Sue had suggested, that women were choosing to do to help them navigate different parts of their journey into motherhood. I am aware that the birth of a baby not only affects a woman's sense of self or equilibrium but potentially also that of a much wider circle of family and friends. However, the focus of this piece of research is specifically on women who have become mothers through childbirth, through which I seek to understand more about their experiences and explore their rituals.

Conception

According to the biblical account of Jesus' conception, Mary's pregnancy could not be fully explained by biology or as a consequence of a human relationship. It took the appearance of an angel to fully communicate the reality and magnitude of this mysterious event.

Likewise today, the moment of conception defies human logic or precise predictability. Sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't, but the consequences of that unknown moment are enormous for the women within whom it occurs.

Frustratingly, my experience of this research process has been equally unpredictable. I have sat for hours in front of a computer screen unable to find the right words, seemingly incapable of stringing a sentence together and then during a shower or in a queue at the checkout an idea will occur to me or a sentence will appear!

Like the biblical account, perhaps the conception of an idea or a baby can be understood as the touch point between earth and heaven, or a dance between human endeavour and that which lies deeply within.

2.1 Introduction

My thesis follows the regular pattern of a woman's journey into motherhood through childbirth. Beginning with a prologue, the journey then moves on to conception, followed by pregnancy and three different phases of birthing, before acknowledging the equally important time of transition for a woman during early motherhood and beyond. This structure purposefully emphasises the point that a woman does not simply give birth, but experiences a series of embodied changes during this time that have powerful implications on her future life as a woman and role as a mother.

Following on from the prologue and this introduction comes my methodology in chapter 3, through which I outline some of the advantages and challenges of my approach, particularly in terms of the feminist principles that have informed the research design and the ethnographic research methods I have used to collect and analyse my data. The next two chapters then provide an overview of the landscape out of which the women's ritualizing has emerged.

Chapter 4 seeks to determine the extent to which women's experiences of their transition into motherhood can be understood as a rite of passage and introduces other social factors that further influence her transition. Chapter 5 then introduces an academic and historical context through which the women's ritualizing can be further understood. Drawing on the wider field of ritual studies I develop a working definition for the women's actions and explore some rituals on the theme of motherhood to which their ritualizing can be seen to relate. Rather than creating a separate literature review, I have chosen to interweave insights and critique of my reading into the relevant chapters.

Chapter 6 is the heart of my study, in which I examine in detail the women's rituals which are divided between three main headings that reflect the timing and thus the focus of their actions. The first, which I have named 'Pre-pare-ing and Gathering' describes the ritualizing the women did during pregnancy. 'Wombing and Cocooning' embraces the women's actions around the time of childbirth and

'Remembering and Emerging' involves rituals the women mentioned in relation to their experiences of early motherhood.

Chapter 7 then goes on to explore the way in which the experiences and rituals that the women talked about can be seen to have impacted upon their spirituality. In doing so I am mindful that all of the women I interviewed described their relationship with the church in different ways and that some of them would not define themselves as Christian.

I have therefore chosen to use the broader concept of spirituality to encompass the different ways that the women described their birthing and experiences of early motherhood impacting upon their sense of themselves, their relationship to others, the world and with God. This chapter concludes with a theological reflection followed by an explanation in which I go beyond what my data specifically says and towards where I sense it points; to birthing as a sacramental event.

The eighth and final chapter is both my conclusion and an epilogue to recognise the importance of continuity both in terms of the future possibilities of this piece of research and the fact that motherhood is not a monochrome status but a constantly evolving journey. My conclusion considers the implications of my findings, particularly in relation to the pastoral care offered to women during their transition into motherhood, and draws together the main themes of this study which are also explored at the beginning of each chapter.

In these blue introductory sections, I have drawn parallels between childbirth and the creative process out of which this thesis was borne. By making connections between Mary's journey into motherhood and the stories of the women I have interviewed I also hope to reinforce the point, and my belief, that every birthing involves a period of embodied transition for women which is intrinsically incarnational and therefore has the potential to be transformative.

Pregnancy

In the biblical narrative we learn that Mary made two important journeys during her pregnancy. The first was to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who on hearing Mary's greeting experienced her own unborn child leap inside her.

This embodied connection between the two women was also reflected in the stories of the women I spoke to, who mentioned significant encounters during their pregnancies with strangers, friends and relatives who were also mothers. These connections based on common experience became precious sources of empowerment for the women's own rites of passage into motherhood.

Mary's other journey was to Bethlehem; a long, uncomfortable journey, away from her daily routine and all that she had previously known.

Similarly, some of the women spoke of pregnancy as a journey away from their previous identities, towards an unknown future. Like Mary, many of them travelled with a partner, but their journey as a mother was different from that of the father. The ability to listen to their own bodies and instincts became increasingly important.

Likewise, the development of my methodology required deep listening, both to the people I met along the way as well as to my own life and experiences. I sometimes wished that someone could tell me how to do it, but in the end the real gift was to trust in my own intuition and travel my own path.

3.1 Introduction

Just as the focus of my thesis developed over time, so too my methodology has evolved during the course of my research journey. Neither did I approach my thesis with a preconceived research design. Instead, my personality and family circumstances have had as much to do with shaping my research and the way I have worked as the people I have met, the books I have read and the academic discipline that I have strived to work within.

The courage and impetus to approach my thesis in this way has primarily come from two research communities that I joined over the course of my studies.³ The women who belong to these groups are committed to developing ways of doing research that is congruent with the principles that underpin their own lives and faith. The idea that a piece of research can evolve out of the creative tensions that exist in the interstice of the researcher's life and the ability to listen to her own experiences is captured in the following excerpt, taken from Slee's introduction to a book that brings together the work of a number of these women:

Long before the formal beginning of research, we are listening to our own lives and the lives of others we know and hearing stories, questions, ideas and hunches, which shape themselves up into our research proposals. We listen to the literature, bringing our own lives and the lives of the women and girls we know into dialogue with it. We listen to our supervisor, peers and colleagues who may shed valuable light on our research. We listen with acute attentiveness to our participants in interviews or other settings. We listen again, over and over, when transcribing and analysing data. We listen when we present our research to others and when we hear back from them. All the time we are listening at many different levels: to self, to the other, to the literature, to the Spirit at work in each of these (Slee, Porter, & Phillips, 2013, p. 18).

³ The Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls was set up in 2010 by Dr Nicola Slee, to further and support qualitative research into the faith lives of women and girls at postgraduate level and beyond, and as a supportive forum for women researchers working in this field. I also belong to an informal group for women engaged in feminist research which usually meets in Manchester, and has been meeting on a monthly basis since the late 1990s.

What has emerged from this process in relation to my own thesis is a piece of empirical research, grounded in feminist principles and shaped by many of the qualitative methods that embody an ethnographic approach. Although many of these terms overlap and interlink, I will endeavour to unpack each of these four strands within the next two sections of this chapter showing how they relate to my methodology, before giving a detailed account of the different stages of my research process.

3.2 Unpacking the Terms: Empirical & Feminist

The term empirical was originally used to refer to a number of ancient Greek practitioners of medicine who preferred to rely on their own observations and experience rather than adhere to traditional doctrines. Nowadays the word empirical is used to describe research that is undertaken particularly within the social sciences and education and is an approach that emphasises what we can observe and experience through the human senses.

I became interested in making sense of my own transition into motherhood and learning from the stories of others precisely because the reality of my experience did not conform to my expectations or the narratives that I had grown up with. I had to use my senses to explore the world around me, but it also became clear that I would need to dig more deeply and listen more intently if I was to find some answers to my questions, and that this would require sensitivity.

As other researchers into the lives of women have recounted: “How does one approach the gaps, the fissures in the standard accounts of faith, the absences and omissions?” (Slee, 2004, p. 43) How can women’s truths be “heard into speech” (Morton, 1985, p. 202), or their unstories be heard and narrated? (Bons-Storm, 1996)

It was my desire to treat the people I met along my research journey with sensitivity that first attracted me towards adopting a methodological approach to this thesis that was grounded in feminist principles. Having said that, I recognise that it is

impossible to narrowly define feminism under an agreed set of beliefs, values or practices.

Equally, within the feminist debate that arose in the social sciences in the early 1970s and has continued ever since, there is now a general consensus that it is also impossible to define a specific feminist research methodology (Denzin, 1994; Coffey, 1999). Instead, there exists a broad range of principles within the ethnographic research discipline that have either been inspired or shaped by the work of feminists and it is many of these principles that have informed my methodology.

However, I also want to emphasise the fact that feminism has influenced my research in other ways too. For example, it was through reading and talking with other women who are feminists that my critical awareness of the androcentric frame of reference that exists within the mainstream church matured. I began to recognise a gendered bias within its liturgies and ministry, where women's experience has been systematically excluded or indeed only included as a problem (Ruether, 1985; Daly, 1986).

In other words, I did not simply adopt a feminist approach to my methodology. Rather, I was attracted to a feminist approach to my research on a number of levels. As Stanley writes: "Feminism is not merely a perspective, a way of seeing; nor even this plus an epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also an ontology, or a way of being in the world" (1990, p. 14). Fundamentally, I feel that grounding my research in feminist principles has allowed me to do my research with integrity, which means that the research has not simply been an academic exercise but has also become a very personal and spiritual journey.

I have chosen to explore two key themes from my methodology to highlight some of the basic feminist methodological principles that I have used, before going on to describe my research in relation to the field of ethnography and my use of a qualitative approach. Although both themes are subtly different, they each highlight the important role that ethics plays within a feminist methodology.

3.2.1 Transparency

As a mother of young children I spend much of my day mediating squabbles and advocating ‘telling the truth’ as an important principle. I also spend most of my time, largely because of the same children, surrounded by chaos. Looking up references whilst cooking tea or working out the outline of a chapter whilst walking back from the school run has been the reality of my world throughout this research journey. The idea that I could and should write openly about the environment out of which the research has evolved was a revelation to me. The concept that I should do so, not as a confession, but as a way of explaining how the research has been moulded by who I am and the way I live, was also liberating. It is also in keeping with the way I try to live my life on a daily basis.

Within the social sciences, the principle of transparency is often referred to as reflexivity, which feminist researchers have then used to challenge established understandings of objectivity and subjectivity (Slee, 2004, p. 51). Reflexivity involves being clear about how the research has been conducted and written up, being open about who the researcher is and the environment in which the research has developed whilst also describing the impact that the research process has had on the researcher. By making the process of the research as transparent as possible, “the power differential between the researcher/writer and the consumer/reader can begin to be broken down” (Stanley, 1990, p. 120).

Reflexivity, for example, encourages the researcher to be honest about the mistakes they have made, which helped me to give a more open account of the research process. As I was so immersed within the world I was researching, it was sometimes difficult not to merge my own voice with those of my interviewees. After the pilot interviews I quickly realised that it was important for me to make clear references in my field notes when I was writing about conversations that had occurred outside of the transcribed interview. I started to highlight when and from whom an idea came, in case I inadvertently began to assume over time that it was mine, as well as colour coding the unfolding of different ideas throughout my journal.

Conversely, I also became aware that I had to pay careful attention to what participants actually said as recorded in the interview transcripts, rather than what I remembered them saying, because as I listened to the women in the interview many of my own memories were evoked and I sometimes came away having only heard the points we had in common.

A similar experience is described by Jane Ribbens who writes “not only does it require much attention and care to hear my own voice, but it requires even more attentiveness to hear and represent the voices of others” (1998, p. 37). By constantly referring back to the interview transcripts and my journal entries I have tried to make the different strands clear during the analysis stage of my research, although inevitably they have become interwoven again as I have drawn themes together in the writing up phase.

The challenge of reflexivity to be open about the research process has also prompted me to be transparent about the changes in my personal life that have occurred during the lifetime of the research. For me, there were two obvious changes, both of which inevitably had an impact, not only on the research process, but also on my own perspective.

The first was my growth in confidence as a researcher, which happened in part due to the challenge of reflexivity itself, because the approach encourages the researcher to write in the first person. Over time I found that this took away a lot of the formality that I had previously associated with this level of research, and enabled me to find my own writing style for the first time in this genre.

The ability to write as myself also encouraged me to become myself in the field. This had important implications on the way I conducted myself and handled relationships. My growing confidence as a researcher for example had an impact on my ability to interject less during interviews which meant that later on, I left longer silences.

Indeed, there are a number of instances in the last few interview transcripts when the participants went on to say more, whilst in the earlier interviews I fear that I may have missed some of these opportunities. Crucially, my growing confidence as a researcher also enabled me to see my research in the context of a craft rather than a clinical experiment, in which my emotions and my temperament were an instrument rather than a handicap (Coffey, 1999, p. 57).

The second big change that occurred during the lifetime of my research was that I became a mum, which again had an inevitable impact on my work. Reflecting back on the pilot interviews that I did before I had children, I believe that the shared experience of motherhood in the later interviews gave me an instant point of connection and thus easier access to more in depth conversations.

It also enabled me to read the women's body language. Although there is no scientific way of proving whether my interpretations were always correct, I became aware that in the later interviews I felt more at ease and better able to read certain kinds of laughter, raised eyebrows and glances which I might previously have missed, not fully understood, or perhaps not even been offered in the first place.

Although this change means that there is a marked difference between the pilot interviews, the first of which I have used as part of my official data, and the rest, I think that changes are inevitable, especially when interviews are conducted over a relatively long time frame, which is a common feature of qualitative research (Lawrence Neuman, 2006, p. 46).

The evolutionary nature of my research means that the process was not rigorously systematic, which Fraser suggests is one of three qualities that can assist in a piece of research's validation in academia (2004, p. 19). However, I believe that the human nature of the researcher and the interview participant, not to mention the different contexts and timing of each interview means that there will always be differences.

Indeed, Slee explores the importance of “listening and looking for difference” in her methodology (2004, p. 47), and although her emphasis is primarily on the difference in women’s perspectives, I also think that differences between interviews are important to acknowledge. My commitment to the principle of transparency has encouraged me to recognise the impact of these changes on my interview data and has in turn, I believe, strengthened the integrity of my analysis.

Lastly, with regards to transparency, I have found that rather than neatly dividing my life into distinct categories in order to analyse them, the juxtaposition of lived experience and research has been illuminating. Certainly, the crisis points both in my personal life and research journey have often proved fruitful in terms of my research.

Although my daily routine is a long way from the clinical environment of a research laboratory, the ability to describe the process has made the research itself richer. Philips acknowledges that the untidiness of the process due to the realities of women’s lives is in itself a dimension of feminist research (2011, p. 54), whilst the importance of being transparent about it is one of the hallmarks that helps to identify this thesis within that genre.

3.2.2 Relationships

Coffey suggests that building relationships is a fundamental part of what gives ethnography “its intensity, its quality and insight” (1999, p. 56). Indeed, people have been an integral part of my research journey, from my interviewees to research colleagues, and developing and negotiating these relationships has not only been important to me, but has also taken up a great deal of my time.

The relationships that I have developed within the field fall into two categories. The first I have described as ‘research friends’; people who I came into contact with because of the research. This includes women I chose to interview, who had voluntarily contacted me in response to a general email request which I had sent out through my network of friends and work colleagues.

The second category I have decided to give the awkward title of 'researched friends'; people I knew before my research and whose story and experience of motherhood I was already aware of. With regard to my research relationship with the women in both of these categories I have strived to engender many of the ethical principles that characterise a feminist approach.

I have tried, for example, to be as transparent as possible about the research process not only within my thesis, but also with my interviewees. I have also attempted to involve them in the interview data; asking them if they would like to use a pseudonym and inviting them to edit the interview transcript.

In relation to my use of pseudonyms a number of the women chose a name that they wanted me to use in reference to their stories. Others asked me to choose a name for them and the rest were keen for me to use their own names. Within the thesis I have chosen not to make it clear when I have used the women's own names or a pseudonym in the belief that this will help to further protect the identity of the women who wished to remain anonymous. To help to protect the women's anonymity I have also made changes to some of the dates.

Indeed, the building up of trust between myself and the women I interviewed was very important to me. Although I felt that it was relatively easy to establish a sense of empathy I was conscious of the potentially unequal relationship between the researcher and their interviewee, highlighted in the work of feminists such as Oakley (1990), Finch (1993) and Birch (1998).

Although on the whole this has been a good approach however, it has occasionally caused problems. I have been acutely aware on occasion, for example, that it has been difficult for some of the women to create the time to be interviewed let alone find the time to review the transcript. In order not to abuse their good will, some transcripts therefore remain unedited and potentially unseen by the interviewee.

In practical terms this has meant that after making an interviewee's transcript available to them and asking for any feedback or comments, I have not then pushed

them for a response. Instead, I have given them the opportunity to edit their interview transcripts and have communicated with them about their inclusion in my final thesis, but have tried not to keep pestering them with updates and requests.

This experience makes me sceptical of the goal described by Gerson and Horowitz (2002, p. 210) of “mutual commitment”. In this respect I agree with Berry (2009, p. 37), that their description of the interview dynamic draws too heavily on their background work in therapeutic conversations. I would argue that to aim to establish a relationship characterised by equality is preferable to one in which the interviewee’s sense of commitment to the project is expected to go much beyond their involvement in the interview itself. In this way the interviewee may feel able but not beholden to engage further with the project, in the way that I have just suggested.

Aware of the time and sensitivity that this approach requires, I have sympathy with DeVault (1999, p. 190) who argues that the collaborative and equal partnerships that earlier feminist writers espoused is not always possible or realistic. She describes a goal where participants have as much control over the process as possible and are not harmed by the research. I like the flexibility that this approach suggests regarding the interviewee’s involvement but I am less comfortable with the idea of being able to ensure against harm.

Although to my knowledge no one has been physically harmed as a consequence of participating in my research, I am aware that it is not so easy to protect people against emotional distress. One example of this came in an email accompanying an edited transcript from a woman I had recently interviewed who wrote: “It was rather awful to read this ... it’s like I vomited out this complicated story in a torrent of words” (Personal Communication, 4 February, 2011).

These words highlighted for me the vulnerability that many of the women must have felt in telling me their story, and the responsibility I then had not to abuse their trust. This is a dilemma that confronts many feminist researchers due to the nature of their research material (Edwards, 1998). On the one hand, Morton’s

concept of being “heard into speech” (1985, p. 202) emphasises the need to make previously hidden or marginalised dimensions of women’s lives visible, firstly to empower people and also potentially to bring about positive change. On the other, the researcher is asking someone to share a very private story with them in order to make it public.

The tensions that I felt around this process influenced an important decision that I made regarding the way I chose to quote the women in my final thesis. The importance of this issue from the interviewee’s perspective was again brought to my attention in another email that accompanied an edited transcript, from a different woman:

It was interesting to read this back and to see transcribed the evidence of just how difficult it is to tell the actual story ... I don’t know if this is allowed, but if you do quote me in your work, I would be grateful if you could edit out at least some of the ‘umms, kind ofs and sort ofs
(Personal communication, 16 March 2012).

This request put me in a genuine dilemma, between responding to a concern raised by one of my participants and wanting to capture my data as precisely as possible.

However, I was also conscious of a number of other related issues. I was aware, for example, of the ethical importance of protecting an interviewee’s anonymity if they wished me to do so, and yet as I transcribed the data I became very conscious in a number of instances of how some of the women’s speech patterns might give away clues to the reader as to their true identity. Due to the overlaps between my personal networks and some of the research groups I belong to, in which I have sometimes presented my findings, this was a very real possibility.

I also didn’t want to lose sight of the importance of addressing the potential power difference between the researcher and the interviewee. Including excerpts from an emotionally raw interview alongside my carefully considered text seemed unfair and disrespectful. As Standing suggests: “It is the ways in which we represent and

interpret the women's voices which reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and power" (Standing, 1998, p. 190).

So although my interview transcripts themselves remain intact, I have chosen to omit most 'umms' and 'urrs' or their equivalents within the quotations I have used in the thesis. As these were most prevalent when the women were emotional, I have then tried to find other ways, such as the inclusion of bracketed descriptions of the women's emotions such as (tearfully) or (laughing) in an attempt to help the reader to understand the quotation more fully. I have also occasionally edited a segment of speech where I believe that a woman's particular pattern of speech itself might reveal her identity. Although this could be considered a manipulation of data, the focus of my research is not on linguistics but on experiences.

Indeed, feminist research highlights the impossibility of neutrality or 'pure' objectivity, laying emphasis instead on the transparency of the research process, and other researchers have described making similar adjustments to the speech of their interviewees (Slee, 2004, p. 57). In the end, the changes I made felt to be a small price to pay within the fraught process of bringing people's private lives into the public arena, and consonant with the ethical principles that underpin a feminist approach.

However, the group I found it most difficult to protect against being harmed were the group I chose to call 'researched friends'; the people I approached for interview or consent because I already knew their story. I found these situations much more difficult to navigate, and therefore more time consuming, and I chose to give the group a clumsy title to reflect this tension.

Sarah and Charlotte, for example, were people I had met whilst serving as a minister. As I remembered back, their stories were an important part of my early research journey although I did not know this at the time. In this instance, my dilemma was whether I should risk our relationship by asking them for permission to use their stories as part of my research, or leave their stories out altogether. I

eventually decided to approach them, at first with an email, trying to explain what I was doing and why.

After what felt like a very long period of time I had a positive reply from them both, so I sent them a draft copy of what I proposed to include, making it clear that they had the option of using a pseudonym if they preferred. I also suggested to them both that we met up again socially. This was a practical way of restating what I had tried to express to them in writing; that our relationship was more important to me than their inclusion in my research. In the event both women gave their permission for me to use their stories.

A second group of people I refer to in the category of researched friends, is people I have met through antenatal groups and playgroups, and friends who I have known for a long number of years who happened to be having children during the time of my research. I enjoy a strong friendship with a large number of women in this group, and yet there are times when I have saved cards or emails they have sent, or written about our conversations in my journal because they have been pertinent to my research.

I did not tell them at the time that I was doing this because I didn't want to spoil our friendship and I didn't want them to feel inhibited in what they said to me. I have felt very uncomfortable about this and yet if I hadn't journaled my thoughts and experiences my research would be poorer and less honest about how my thinking has changed during the course my research.

I attempted to reconcile this tension at the time by making sure that all of my friends were aware of the subject matter of my thesis, and always being honest about the research whenever anyone enquired about it. I have also asked permission of those whose personal story I have gone on to use in my final thesis.

Lastly, in this category of ‘researched friends’ is an experience with a good friend called Sophie. At the time I was reading about Mother Blessings,⁴ and Sophie was pregnant. Inspired by some of the ideas I had read about, I decided to contact some of her female friends and relatives before the birth in order to create a bracelet of beads that we could give to her as a gift for her to wear during labour.

At the time I did this for her as a friend, but later I wondered whether I should ask her if she would be willing to be interviewed about the experience for my research. The tension for me was knowing that by asking I risked turning what had been a very positive experience into one in which she felt that I had used her as a guinea pig and in doing so, abused our friendship. In the end I chose not to ask her for an interview, although inevitably that experience along with many others has been part of my research journey and has permeated the research in other ways.

As these examples illustrate, the role of what Coffey helpfully describes as a “reflective insider” (1999, p. 56) and the challenge of finding creative strategies to adhere to the ethical principle of confidentiality explored by Chang (2008, p. 56) involves negotiating complex relationships which “can all be made, maintained and lost during the course of fieldwork” (Coffey, 1999, p. 57). Even the seemingly lower standards suggested by DeVault (1999) are difficult to ensure.

However, ethical considerations regarding the rights and trust of my interviewees have increasingly come into focus during the lifetime of my research journey. Recognising the relationship tensions that have existed for me is also an important feature of a feminist epistemology, and I believe my approach reflects this same spirit: that in all of my research relationships I have tried to treat people with respect and attempted to make sensitive decisions that give priority to my relationship with the individual over and occasionally above the research itself.

⁴ I will explore the concept of Mother Blessings in more detail in chapter 5.

3.3 Unpacking the Terms: Qualitative & Ethnographic

It was due to the nature of my research interest and my own personal inclinations that I chose to adopt a qualitative approach. Although the term encompasses a wide variety of styles, the method broadly refers to research that collects data in the form of words and meanings rather than numbers and measurements.

Qualitative research is often characterised by an intense encounter with a small number of people, and whilst it is limited in the extent to which it can draw universally applicable conclusions it is a useful approach when trying to explore an area of interest in order to raise questions and identify possible themes for further study. Most importantly from my point of view it is also an approach that has enabled me to gather in depth data.

So although I began my research ‘in the field’ by sending out a questionnaire to a relatively large number of people through my own personal networks, the foundation of my research data was made up of ten transcribed interviews, along with accompanying field notes and journal entries.

However, as I progressed I also collected together any information I could find connected to the interviews. So I saved the completed questionnaires from the women I went on to interview. I also kept emails, transcribed telephone conversations and read anything the women themselves had written or published, with their permission.

The result is a rich accumulation of data from a variety of sources, akin to Geertz’s “thick descriptions” (1993) and the process of triangulation where multiple sources of data can “help [to] enhance the content, accuracy and validity of the autoethnographic writing” (Chang, 2008, p. 55). A list of the women I interviewed and the sources of data I accumulated relating to each of their interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

Alongside these sources I have also collected news articles and poems, private letters and cards. I have read key academic texts, alongside whimsical bedside

books on motherhood do's and don'ts. Although each of these sources is valuable in its particularity, it is the accumulation of these fragments of knowledge that helps to add a richness and depth to my data that is "in keeping with the postmodern spirit of 'bricolage' – enquiry which proceeds by piecing together fragments, eschewing elevated theoretical schemes, aware of the provisionality and fragility of knowledge" (Graham, 2000, p. 106).

Indeed, within my data there is a mixture of fact and interpretation, tensions and opportunism which also reflects what Beverley Skeggs has described as "the difficult, messy world of empirical work" (2002, p. 363). However, it is the detail and often the juxtaposition of my material that has led me towards new insights or has sometimes helped me to establish a sense of perspective on a particular issue. The richness of the data is also an important feature of ethnographic enquiry, which brings me on to the fourth and final strand of my methodology.

As I have stated above, and has been evident throughout this chapter, the various terms I have identified as characteristic of my methodology overlap with one another. Ethnography is both a process and a product that in common with feminist methodological principles challenges the traditional view; that the researcher must retain a critical distance in order to maximise objectivity. Its reliance on rich data creates a natural overlap with a qualitative approach, whilst reflexivity is also fundamental.

So, what is ethnography and how does it relate to my methodology? The origin of the term lies within nineteenth century Western anthropology, where an ethnography was a descriptive account of a community or culture, usually located outside of the West. It traditionally involved the researcher spending time with a particular community and acting as an outside observer who tried to retain a critical distance from those they were researching.

Classic examples of this style can be seen in the work of Geertz (1993) and Turner (1995) whose insights I refer to in relation to my own research, or the ethnographic studies of Margaret Mead (1949) whose detailed reports concerning attitudes to

sex in traditional South Pacific and Southeast Asian cultures contributed to changing attitudes to sex in the West, particularly during the 1960s. However, in common with many of the other approaches I have described, it has also been reinterpreted and recontextualised since then in a variety of ways, to the point that there is no one standard definition.

One of the ways in which it has developed since the mid-1970s has become known as autoethnography. Whilst conventional ethnography has tended to be fairly impersonal, with the researcher maintaining a distance both within the field and in relation to the text they produce, autoethnography places the author firmly in the foreground. Although autoethnography is also used to describe a wide range of research, however there are some key features within this approach that link directly and helpfully to my own research.

Firstly, I set out to try to better understand my own experience by reflecting on it in relation to the stories of other women and “autoethnography is an excellent vehicle through which researchers come to understand themselves and others” (Chang, 2008, p. 52). So whilst I was using ethnographic methods, the fact I was researching my own world, rather than that of someone ‘other’, positions my work within the field of autoethnography.

Indeed, from the perspective of my ‘researched friends’ I was just another mum who happened to be doing some research, rather than the other way around. Even with my interviewees, the fact that I was a mum meant that some of the issues facing other researchers relating to empathy did not occur to the same extent because we had an instant point of connection.

The familiarity that an autoethnographer has with their field is highlighted by Chang (2008) as a great benefit in both the initial stages of research in terms of data collection and with respect to the process of in depth data analysis and interpretation. Deck (1990) goes further by arguing that the views of outsider, non-native ethnographers are highly suspect because of their unfamiliarity with the field.

From my point of view, the label of autoethnography helped me to feel that researching my own world was a legitimate approach and I believe that being immersed in the field at the time enabled me to pick up on nuances I might otherwise have missed. However, I did not always find my dual identity as an autoethnographer easy, as I have already mentioned in relation to my 'researched friends' and I appreciated the ability to distance myself from the field later on in the research as I will explain shortly.

As part of trying to understand my own experience of the transition into motherhood, I also needed to explore the context. Based on my own hunches and themes that emerged from the interviews I became increasingly aware of the impact that the traditional androcentric view of the world has had on our understanding of birth, particularly in the spheres of religion and medicine.

My desire to unearth some of these deceptions echoes Pratt's view that autoethnography is a form of writing that can address both the writers' own group and a more dominant one. Although she is careful not to overstate autoethnography as a form of resistance, she does suggest that it can play a role in offering alternative forms of meaning and power from those of the dominant culture (1994, p. 28).

Linked with this was my hope that by drawing together themes from my own experience and the stories of others, as well as gathering ritual resources I might be able to empower other women in the future. Slee suggests that empowerment is an important principle that helps to characterize a piece of research as feminist, saying that it "is not merely the subject matter or content (research *about* women) or the gender of the researcher (research *by* women) but the commitment to conducting research with the specific goal of empowering and liberating women (research *for* women)" (2004, p. 49).

Furthermore, Chang suggests that autoethnography is a helpful tool in trying to meet this end. Drawing on her experience of 'cross-cultural coalition building' she argues that the self-reflection necessary within the process of autoethnography

“can lead to self-transformation through self-understanding” which can then be used to help others (2008, p. 57).

I am as yet unclear as to my future plans and how I might best be able to share what I have learnt, but I am aware that even through incidental conversations during the course of my research, other women who are also mothers have been keen to hear of women with similar experiences to them, and have also shown an interest in the rituals that I have come across.

The importance of reflection within the autoethnographic process is the final feature that I would like to highlight in relation to my research methodology. In fact, within the field the ability to reflect and explain, thus “connecting the personal to the cultural” is one of the factors that helps to distinguish autoethnography from an autobiography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). As Chang explains, “The minimum requirement is that autoethnographers must be willing to dig deeper into their memories, excavate rich details, bring them onto examination tables to sort, label, interconnect, and contextualize them in the sociocultural environment” (2008, p. 51).

I did not gain my desire to reflect on my experience in relation to others and the culture of which I am a part because I wanted to produce of piece of autoethnography. Rather, as a student of practical theology I have been schooled throughout my ministerial training in the craft of “reflective practice” (Lyall, 2001).

However, the time frame within which I did my research became an important factor within the reflection process, because whilst I was immersed in the world of early motherhood during the interviewing stage, I became increasingly distanced from it during the phase of analysis and writing. Although I am still a mother, for example, I would now be regarded as an ‘outsider’ at a toddler group or breastfeeding café, and my memories of that time and the emotions I associate with it are no longer as intense.

So, although it was good to be ‘within’ the world of my research for a time, I also think that the relative distance that I have gained over the life span of my research, mainly due to the age of my children, has helped the reflection process, particularly in terms of getting experiences into perspective.

However, whilst I have found it to be a useful approach, autoethnography has been criticised by some as narcissistic and self-indulgent (Salzman, 2002; Sparkes, 2002) and thus lacking academic rigour or methodological validity.

Aware of this criticism, Leon Anderson has made a case for “analytic autoethnography” (2006), in which he recognises “the value of autoethnographic research within the analytic ethnographic paradigm” (p. 374) but advocates that it should be used within appropriate limits and among other methods so that it can become more widely recognised within the field of social sciences as a credible methodological basis from which “theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena” can be developed (p. 373).

The realist paradigm upon which Anderson bases his approach is criticised by other autoethnographers however, such as Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000). They believe that the value and integrity of autoethnography is violated when it is framed in terms of conventional sociological analysis and see all social theories as constructed narratives falsely presented as factual accounts.

Rather than following Anderson’s “analytic autoethnography” route, I have chosen an approach which reflects Ellis and Bochner’s points, by using the particularity of my data to challenge some of the universalist claims that have previously been made, such as the pattern of a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960), and by using the details of the women’s stories to invite the reader into the world of early motherhood. Furthermore, accepting the need for academic rigour and methodological validity, I have assessed my own methodology for what Heewon Chang (2008) describes as the “potential pitfalls” for autoethnographers.

Firstly, Chang warns against an excessive focus on the self in isolation from others, arguing that autoethnography “should reflect the interconnectivity of self and others” (p. 54) and refer to the wider cultural context within which the study is situated. Linked to this is Chang’s second point in which she warns against an overemphasis on narration at the expense of analysis and cultural interpretation.

Both of these tests highlight the delicate balance between the incorporation of the researcher’s own story and the experiences of others which is a tension that I have been aware of throughout the lifetime of my research. Capturing some of the raw emotions that I experienced during early motherhood was important in my journal for example, but over time this became mediated and interwoven alongside other people’s stories and wider reading, before finally being shaped into an autoethnographic account.

Chang’s third point focuses on the role of memory which she describes both in terms of a unique source of data for an autoethnographer as well as a pitfall. Due to the selective nature of memory she argues that as in any good research practice autoethnographers need to support their arguments with a broad base of data and thus recommends complementing the “internal” data of memory with data from external sources, such as interviews and other related documents. The gathering of data in this way provides the bases for triangulation which, as I have mentioned earlier, helps to enhance the accuracy and validity of the research.

The fourth test or potential pitfall relates to the ethics around the ownership of stories. Simply because an account is autobiographical does not mean that issues of confidentiality do not arise in relation to the lives and stories of other people who are also mentioned. Indeed, issues of confidentiality were a concern for me as I have described in an earlier section of this chapter entitled ‘Relationships’. This has prompted me, on occasion, to exclude some stories in order to protect someone’s identity or to avoid causing any offence.

The fifth and final point that Chang makes is that because the term autoethnography has been used to describe a wide range of narrative enquiry it is

important for researchers to make themselves aware of the potential pitfalls and define their use of the method clearly in order to avoid confusion.

My experience is that undertaking this research and producing this thesis has involved a constant process of rebalancing, between the immediacy of personal experience and analysis. By keeping Chang's potential pitfalls in mind, alongside familiarising myself with other autoethnographic accounts (Berry, 2009; Walton, Writing Methods in Theological Reflection, 2014) I have tried to use my own experience as a lens rather than a primary focus, in order to better understand the stories of others and empathetically relate their experiences to my wider reading.

3.4 Narrative of the Research Process

Before submitting my initial research proposal, I conducted four pilot interviews in 2007 which were focused on finding out about ceremonies that parents were choosing to hold to mark the arrival of a new baby as an alternative to baptism. Due to the fact that I was helping the first couple I interviewed to create the ceremony itself, both parents were present, but for the rest, mainly for practical reasons, only the mother was available.

At the time of the interview and particularly during the process of transcribing the interview data, I was aware of how much of the mother's own story was present during the interviews. Although this could perhaps have been anticipated in the mother-only interviews, it was true of all four, and reminded me of many of the visits I had made to families prior to baptism during my ministry. In many of these visits as in the interviews, the women had talked, often in great detail, about their own experiences, sometimes in relation to the ceremony, but often I sensed because the need to talk about what she had recently gone through with someone who had the time to listen was important.

In January 2008, I began my maternity leave with the intention of returning to the research twelve months later, by starting to plan my own children's ceremony to mark their arrival. However, as I have already mentioned, partly due to my

awareness of the predominance of the women's stories in my previous interviews and baptismal visits, in conjunction with reflecting on my own feelings and experience, the focus of my research changed. I became interested from both a personal and research perspective in hearing more stories of women who had become mothers through childbirth and what rituals, if any, they had found or created to help them through this transition.

3.4.1 The Interviewees

Although all four of my pilot interviews contained aspects of the mother's story, I have only chosen to use the first one as part of my official data. Whilst it has clear differences to the rest, particularly because both parents were present, the fact that I knew the mother well before the interview means that the ease with which she told me elements of her story makes it more akin to the rest of my interview data, collected after I became a mother, than the other pilots.

I conducted the other nine interviews between August 2009 and June 2012. Of these women, six I knew beforehand, and the remaining three I met for the first time at the interview itself. The women ranged in age from early thirties to late fifties which means that some were talking about a very recent experience, whilst others were referring to something that happened a relatively long time ago.

Although it is easy to assume that the recollections of the latter group of women were not as clear as some of those who spoke about more recent experiences, this was not obviously the case. One reason for this is perhaps because the older women had had more time to reflect on their experiences, whilst some of the others were still deeply immersed in the day to day care of small children, when the lack of sleep and constant demands can make time for reflection difficult. A number of the women had also collected together artefacts, including journals, in preparation for my visit which served to jog their memories.

It would also seem likely that the experiences of the women would differ considerably depending upon when their children were born, but again this did not

obviously seem to be the case. In fact, the children ranged from being a few months old to their late twenties, but some themes such as the medicalisation of birth and the intensity of early mothering were common to each of the women's stories.

Equally, my main focus was to find out about any rituals that the women had experienced. The timing and nature of these seemed to depend more on the individual women's experiences than on the year when it occurred. Edna, for example, chose to mark the end of breastfeeding because it had been a particular challenge for her, whilst Maria wanted to hold a Mother Blessing before her daughter's birth but not her son's because of her fears surrounding the prospect of having a girl. Indeed, rather than conducting a comparative study focused on a particular type of ritual, I was interested in gathering together as many different examples as possible.

All of the women who I interviewed had experienced biological childbirth, and some chose to talk about more than one of their experiences. One of the women was not in a relationship at the time of having a child. The other nine were either married or had a long term partner.

The interviewees all came from the UK or a similarly westernized culture, because although I am interested in learning from other traditions that was not the nature of this study. Rather, I was interested in hearing from women with a similar cultural heritage to my own about the rituals they knew about or had created for themselves.

The women were also all broadly middle class, well-educated and had some form of church connection. Four of them were ordained within their own denomination, another two had an active involvement, through work or personal interest whilst the remaining four all mentioned having been brought up within the church as a child. Although I didn't purposefully choose to only interview women from these categories, I used my personal networks to make contact with women who might be interested in taking part in my research, and these groupings reflect my own background and personal networks.

I am also aware that creating rituals is not a natural part of everyday life within this culture, so the fact that the women who responded to my invitation to be interviewed had a background in the church or had links to alternative middle class groups where the use of rituals is more common, is not surprising. Clearly however, the group of women from whom my interview data came is not a representative sample.

Rather, this thesis is an attempt to draw together strands of experience and wisdom from a handful of women who chose to ritualize aspects of their experience. They have not only spoken honestly and in depth about their experiences but they have also shared intimate details of the rituals that they created. Every birthing story was different, from child to child and mother to mother and so too were the rituals.

In other words, the aim of this study is not to suggest that all women experience birthing or motherhood in the same way or that one ritual should be appropriate for all women who are mothers. Instead, I have attempted to draw together themes from the stories I have gathered, from a small group of women from a similar cultural background to my own, at a particular point in history.

3.4.2 The Interviews

Five of the women I interviewed responded to my initial questionnaire, either by filling it in or simply by replying that they would be willing to be interviewed.

Another two were names suggested to me by friends, as people who might be worth talking to and the other three were either women I already knew or who I came to know during my research journey.

Having established contact, I then sent each participant an information sheet by email which set out the aims of my study and some of the practical details including issues around confidentiality, the choice of using a pseudonym and permission to record our conversation. Aware that the interviews may be emotionally difficult for a number of the women, I also suggested that they consider contacting a friend

who could be aware that the interview was taking place and potentially be available afterwards if needed.

I also invited each of the women to choose the time and location for their interview. Although in practical terms this was usually a negotiation due to my own limitations regarding childcare, I was keen to give the interviewees as much flexibility as possible and to become a guest in their space rather than the other way around in order to try to reduce the potential power imbalance between us. I found these preliminary email exchanges helpful, particularly with the women I had not met before as it gave us the chance to get to know each other a little before meeting.

In the end, eight out of the ten women chose to be interviewed in their own home which I think enabled them to relax more quickly and often show me items pertinent to the interview that they may not have thought of bringing with them or were too unwieldy to transport. Alongside smaller items and the journals that I have already mentioned, for example, on one occasion I was shown a body-cast of the woman's pregnant form.

For the two interviews not held in the women's own homes, the individuals both chose a location that they knew well, and although all of the locations were susceptible to interruptions, I think that the advantages of interviewing the women in their own space rather than mine far outweighed the disadvantages.

The interviews themselves lasted between one and a half to two hours and although I had a list of questions that I wanted to cover I was keen to let the conversation flow as naturally as possible. In this approach I was conscious of the work of other feminist researchers (Oakley, 1990; Berry, 2009) who used open ended questions and semi-structured interviews to enable the women to feel more at ease and to tell their stories in their own words as much as possible.

I am particularly thankful to have adopted this approach because although I initially set out to ask the women about intentionally created rituals, I quickly began to realise that they were also describing to me seized moments that they had marked

or simply remembered that had become equally significant to them. Had I adopted a more formal interviewing technique or limited each woman to describing a single birth or ritual, I might not have uncovered so much rich data or become aware of a very different pattern of women's ritualising than the one I had first presumed.

Although I tried to let the interview flow as naturally as possible I have become conscious upon rereading the transcripts that I interjected less in the later interviews, as I have already mentioned. What I gradually developed during the course of the interview process was the ability to use my facial expressions and body language to encourage the women in what they were saying, rather than to verbally interject and thus potentially interrupt the women's flow.

This was important because although the women were all very articulate, some of them had not put these particular experiences into words before, and those who had, had usually done so in written rather than verbal form. To hear into speech the women's own thoughts and experiences, sometimes for the first time was a very fragile experience in which the "verbal intersupport network ... [of] frequent overt and nonverbal expressions of understanding" described by Minster (1991, p. 37) became crucially important.

Indeed, at points some of the interviews were emotionally charged, but as well as tears there was also a lot of laughter. Again in these situations I think it helped being a mother, because even if I hadn't experienced exactly what the woman was describing at the time, there was enough common ground to be able to offer a gesture of common understanding. These experiences at times reminded me of 'trench humour' where people outside of the situation may simply not have understood.

Interestingly, it was often these moments that I wrote about in my journal which I tried to complete as soon after the interview as possible. I think that was partly because I was very aware that they were the critical junctures of the interview, at which point the woman might choose to say more or clam up altogether. However, the prominence of these moments in my journal was counterbalanced by the

interview transcript which often contained sections of speech that I had forgotten about altogether.

Although I sometimes found the hours of transcribing tedious and the time to write in my journal or make detailed field notes a challenge, having already disrupted my family's routine in order to attend the interview, when I came to analyse my data I became increasingly grateful that I had made the effort to create these three different sources of data as accurately as possible.

3.4.3 Handling the Data

Having completed the transcribing process and written up my journal entries and field notes I felt a sense of trepidation at the thought of pulling it all apart again in order to analyse my data. I suddenly felt unequal to the challenge but some of my research colleagues encouraged me to trust my own instincts. Indeed, the more I worked with the data, the better I got to know it and the easier it became to recognise links or common themes.

Thus, I tentatively began to follow a process based on my own intuition, similar to that described by Slee who writes,

The process of data analysis is in many ways akin to the process of interviewing itself, and requires a continuation of the same skilled listening processes, so that the underlying meanings implicit in the women's account can be brought to light and articulated (2004, p. 57).

In fact, in the end I developed a process of creating what I now understand to be "constructed knowledge" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986). This involved not only recognising that all knowledge is contextual, but also accepting myself as a creator of knowledge, and valuing both subjective and objective strategies for knowing. Whilst my ministerial training in contextual theology stood me in good stead for the former, it was the confidence to believe in my own ability that took time to develop.

My data comprised ten sets of interviews, with field notes in which I recorded some of the practical details of each encounter, and my journal where I had written more descriptive accounts of my thoughts and feelings at the time. I had also collected together other material that was pertinent to each interview when available, as already mentioned and described in the column entitled 'Other' in Appendix 1.

Due to the fact that I wanted to find out as much as I could about women's experiences and their rituals, I did not limit my interviewees to describing one birthing experience or ritual. In fact, the women generally adopted a chronological narrative approach in which they described their experiences around each child and any related rituals. So, rather than having ten women with a corresponding number of birthing experiences and rituals, I had details relating to twenty four separate birthing experiences and many more rituals as well as ritual fragments which I will go on to refer to as marked or remembered moments.

For ease I first decided to separate my data into two distinct blocks by disentangling the individual experiences from the rituals. I then looked for themes within each of these sections. In relation to the women's experiences of motherhood, I developed a system of post it notes where examples from individual stories were collated under a series of headings. This process was helpful in enabling me to recognise dominant themes that emerged from my data rather than threads that I had remembered from the interviews because they had been pertinent to my own experience.

In this approach I was trying to follow what the text books refer to as grounded theory where themes are allowed to emerge out of the data rather than being imposed upon it. However, I now recognise that in reality the process is much more complicated than this and is better described by Slee's analogy of a "free-flowing dialogue" (2004, p. 57). My interest in seeing whether a woman's experience of her transition into motherhood can be understood or better explained as a rite of passage, for example, meant that in reality the shape of chapter 4 evolved out of a dialogue between my data, my reading and hunches based on my own experience.

The themes that emerged helped me to illustrate the experience based context out of which the women's rituals emerged although the limitations of space and the need to create a comprehensive framework means that I have focused on broad themes around which many other experiences and nuances were mentioned and are of course possible.

I then tried to work out how best to handle and analyse the women's rituals. Firstly, as I have already mentioned, I needed to distinguish between the different kinds of ritual activity that the women described. I then decided to separate them into three sections, according to time frame, which became the focus of chapter 6.

However, a further significant theme emerged from my research data that didn't easily fit within my analysis chapters on either experiences or rituals. The impact that the women's experience of childbirth and motherhood had on their spirituality was an important feature in each of the interviews and this became my final data analysis chapter and appears in the thesis as chapter 7.

These three chapters on experiences, rituals and spirituality form the core of this thesis. The process that I have described involved reading and rereading my data, sorting and shuffling my themes, writing and rewriting again and again until it felt right. The confidence to follow my intuition means that the way I have analysed my data is consistent with the approach that I used for the rest of my methodology.

3.5 Conclusions

The way in which I went about collecting and analysing my data was not a tidy exercise, but my use of research methods that were grounded in my own social practice (Edwards, 1998) and being transparent about the process, are both elements that help to give my methodology its integrity. As Phillips wrote of her own research, "It bares all, therefore exposes itself to a more detailed critique, but its conclusions convey the integrity of the researcher" (2011, p. 70).

So, although I cannot make any claims towards the universality of my findings my methodological approach enabled me to piece together a rich set of data that is contextual and suggests a much more complex view of women's experiences of their transition into motherhood than I had initially envisaged.

Indeed, part of the impetus for this research in the first place was to look "beyond [the] simplistic assumptions of a common, undifferentiated unity of experience" (Slee, 2004, p. 47) which suggest that becoming a mother is a simple, natural or linear process. The validity of my research is further supported by the thoroughgoing, informed and sensitive nature of my analysis.

CHAPTER 4: MOTHERHOOD AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

Labour

At one level, the biblical narrative tells us nothing about Mary's labour. The focus of the story, not unusually within patriarchal society, is on the one who is to be born rather than on the one who labours.

However, what we are told about the circumstances of the birth allows us to weave together threads connecting Mary's story with the experience of others.

In Luke's account, for example, we are told that 'the time came for her to deliver her child' and yet 'the time came' at a very inconvenient time for Mary. The promptings of her body took precedence over everything else, just as the timings and rhythms of a natural labour can still override all other plans, however carefully laid.

The timing of her labour meant that Mary was away from home. Not only that, but because there was 'no place for them in the inn' she was also estranged from the normal comforts of everyday living. Mary experienced labour in an unfamiliar environment, just as the rigours of labour transport a woman into a different world that is 'betwixt and between', neither one place nor the other, somewhere between known and unknown, life and death.

Lastly, there is the suggestion that Mary laboured, if not surrounded by animals, then close to the place where they came to feed. Amidst the throes of labour, all earthly demarcations of wealth and status are stripped away and women become animal-like for a time, overtaken by the natural rhythms of their bodies.

Clearly, the fact that Mary gave birth meant that she also laboured, but the story as we know it has been sanitised, distancing Mary's experience from that of ordinary women. By reinterpreting the story from a different viewpoint, Mary's labour mirrors that of others, and this may in turn help women to articulate their own birthing stories and recognise the mystery and beauty of incarnation within their own experience.

4.1 Introduction

Before Sue Gill's email⁵ in which she described motherhood as an ancient rite of passage, I had been so immersed within the details of my own experience of childbirth that I felt overwhelmed and to some extent debilitated. By failing to give birth without medical intervention and then finding myself unable to breastfeed, I felt as though I had failed, and the sheer exhaustion, both of labour and the ongoing care of the twins meant that I was in survival mode, believing that the experience was something that I would just have to endure and eventually with any luck forget.

However, the suggestion that I was in the midst of an ancient rite of passage helped to alter my perspective. I started to think of the chaos around me as part of a process and the blood, sweat and tears felt to have a more noble purpose. At the time, I wrote in my journal: "When I think of it in this way [as a rite of passage] I imagine myself to be part of a long line of women and I start to feel special and take pride in what I do" (Journal entry, 9 February 2009). It also helped me to start making connections between what I had hitherto thought of as personal failings and the stories of others.

I begin this chapter by explaining the theory behind the concept of a rite of passage. The theory can be understood to resonate with both an experience of childbirth (a woman's rite of passage) and any rituals (rites of passage) that may accompany this transition. In this chapter however, I focus solely on exploring the women's experience of their rite of passage leaving my exploration of the women's rituals until chapter 6.

From my data I have chosen to explore a number of key themes that emerged from the women's stories. As will become clear during the course of this chapter however, alongside times when the theories surrounding a rite of passage help to elucidate some of the women's experiences there were also instances when the model was at odds with the stories I heard.

⁵ See Prologue

In the final section I will therefore move away from the concept of a rite of passage to explore a different paradigm that reflects my data more accurately. As a whole, this chapter not only seeks to explore childbirth and motherhood as an important and valuable experience of transition for women, but also helps to provide the context out of which the women's rituals emerged.

4.2 What is a Rite of Passage?

Even though I had journaled my own thoughts and associations about the phrase at the time of Sue Gill's email, when I came to write this section of my thesis a number of years later having studied the area in more detail, I felt that I had lost any perspective of what the term means colloquially. So one day on my way to pick up the children from school, I asked a handful of people what they understood a rite of passage to be.

One girl from the local junior school said: "It's like, when someone comes to live in a country and after ten years they get citizenship." A retired gentlemen replied: "A rite of passage is a wedding, baptism or a funeral ... starting school, that sort of thing." Another parent said: "It's going through a load of shit and then coming out the other end - wiser!"

This mixture of ritual and life stage transition is a good reflection of the term's dual identity, as Grimes explains; "*We undergo* passages, but we *enact* rites" (2000, p. 5), and yet both have come to be understood in relation to a similar pattern and referred to in the same way. However, the term has become so widely used both colloquially and across a range of academic disciplines, where at times it has been inappropriately applied, that it is important for me to outline its history and origins before I attempt to use it in relation to my own data.

The phrase was coined by a Belgian called Arnold van Gennep who belonged to a group of anthropologists which included the French scholars Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Their work around the turn of the twentieth century on ritual and beliefs has strongly influenced the development of the sociology and anthropology

of religion ever since. In 1909, van Gennep published *Les rites de passage* which was the French title of a now classic text translated into English in 1960 in which he introduced the idea that diverse forms of human behaviour from around the world can be ordered and understood through a single, simplified pattern.

Van Gennep based his work on numerous ethnographic accounts of the rituals of preliterate societies provided by other researchers in the field, alongside material drawn from the sacred writings of Hindu, Jewish and Christian religions. His theory is based on the fact that the whole of human life is marked by change and that because we are not just biological but also social beings, we have attached value to these transitions which are then interpreted and marked through communal celebrations. His book introduced a theory for interpreting the rituals that accompany and often facilitate these major life cycle transitions.

Van Gennep based his model on the idea that a person's change in status is similar to the way in which a body moves through space. He described the process as falling into three phases and likened it to the way in which a person can leave one room, cross a threshold and then become present in the next room.

Drawing on the Latin root for the word threshold (*limen*), van Gennep called the three phases *preliminal* (before the threshold), *liminal* (on the threshold) and *postliminal* (after the threshold) (1960, p. 21). He also referred to the same three phases as *separation*, *transition* and *incorporation*. Although van Gennep's theory was based on male initiation ceremonies, a woman's journey into motherhood through childbirth can also be understood in relation to this threefold sequence.

During the first phase for example, an individual withdraws from their current role in a community and begins to prepare to move on. This separation can occur physically, symbolically or emotionally. To use van Gennep's metaphor, through the antenatal period a woman moves towards the threshold, perhaps with the door just beginning to open.

The physiological and psychological changes that she undergoes over this nine month period slowly separate her from her previous condition, as her eating habits begin to change along with her physical shape and sleep patterns. She may also need to leave work or relinquish some of her usual responsibilities before the baby is born.

A woman's experience of labour and birth can then be seen to transport her into a second phase, which is understood to exist between the other two states. Victor Turner, who is also a prolific writer in the field of ritual studies, has developed van Gennep's concept of liminality and described it as "betwixt and between" a former role and future status, during which time the transformation work occurs (1979, p. 95).

In a traditional initiation ceremony this is the period in which an individual may experience a symbolic death and rebirth, which in turn can be seen to mirror the tensions between life and death that a woman endures during labour and birthing. It has been suggested that these challenges can help an individual to move on by promoting some of the new skills that they will need in order to integrate into their new role (Turner & Bruner, 1986).

During the final phase of incorporation, an individual returns to the community, ready to embrace the roles and responsibilities associated with their new position and the occasion is marked with a celebration, during which the Initiates' new skills and achievements are displayed and publicly recognised by the wider community.

For a new mother this phase is referred to as the postnatal period in which mother and baby are still understood to be vulnerable, but during which time the woman begins to reintegrate back into society. In the past, within the UK, many women would have been subject to strict protocols during this phase of their transition, which would have culminated in the Rite of Churching. Notwithstanding the fact that this ritual is not widely practised any longer in this country (Knödel, 1997, p. 106) it could be argued that the occasion of a child's Baptism or Naming Ceremony

now fulfils a similar function for the mother, but this view deserves more scrutiny which I will attend to later.

Since van Gennep defined his analytical category of a rite of passage, researchers have observed threefold sequences in other rites within different cultures around the world, just as I have shown that the journey into motherhood through childbirth can be understood in terms of three phases. His influence can be seen in the writings of others, such as Joseph Campbell's myth of the hero (1993), and Carl Jung's work describing the process of self-realisation taking place in a liminal space (Jacobi, 1973).

However, despite the fact that some of the literature seems to give the impression that van Gennep discovered this three stage social schema, Grimes argues that it is important to recognise that van Gennep actually invented it and there is a danger in oversimplifying complex transitions into memorable patterns (2000, pp. 103-7). This does not make van Gennep's theory defunct, but it is important to highlight some of its weaknesses, particularly when relating it to data that lies outside of his original scope.

I have divided the next section into five parts to explore some of the major themes that emerged from my data, using van Gennep's theory as a lens through which to understand the women's experiences more clearly. I will also use their stories, and research based on the experiences of other women, to show that there are points at which van Gennep's theory distorts rather than illuminates our understanding of a woman's journey through childbirth into motherhood.

4.3 Exploring van Gennep's Model of a Rite of Passage

4.3.1 The Nature of Relationships

A theme that emerged across my research data in a variety of different ways was that of relationships, and although a number of the women talked about their relationships with their husbands or partners, it is the nature of the bonds that they

made with other women during their transition into motherhood that I want to focus on in this section. I will do this using the lens of a concept called *communitas* (1979; 1995) which was developed by Victor Turner out of van Gennep's original theory.

Regarding relationships, from a personal perspective I remember feeling very nervous at the beginning of my antenatal classes. It felt like the first day at a new school. I had signed up because there were things that I wanted to learn about childbirth and looking after a baby, but my nervousness emanated from my sense that this was also an important opportunity to make new friends.

Although I wouldn't have articulated it in this way at the time, as Karen Kennedy explained of her own experience: "It is important to me that there are people around who can empathize with my situation and share in the dilemmas, especially those who are at the same stage of apprenticeship themselves" (1993, p. 12). Even though the analogy of school friendships and apprenticeships are helpful, it is Turner's idea of *communitas* that I have found particularly useful to explore the theme of relationships.

Turner's theory suggests that *communitas* emerges from the experience of liminality amongst the liminal *personae* or "threshold people" during a rite of passage and at its most basic is perhaps best understood as a common bond between them. He explains that "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (1995, p. 95), and it is the chemistry or magic that exists around this time that creates conditions for very different relationships to occur.

Although the experience of liminality is most strongly associated with the second of the three phases, van Gennep accepted that the boundaries within his threefold model were porous. This allows for an overspill of liminality into the preliminal (pregnancy) and postliminal (early nursing) stage of a person's transition. Even though some of my research participants also spoke about creating strong bonds

with other women during labour (particularly doulas,⁶ whose role I will explore in more detail over the course of this thesis) it is the nature of the relationships that they experienced during pregnancy and early nursing that will be my focus in this section.

The first feature of *communitas* that I want to explore with regards to the relationships that the women described is that of being outsiders, or existing on the margins of society (Turner, 1995, p. 125). This may at first seem to be a surprising characteristic to associate with pregnant women or new mothers. However, I want to suggest that it is an important contributory factor in helping to explain the depth and intimacy, of which some of my research participants voiced their experiences during this time in terms of their relationships with other women.

In describing her experience of meeting up with a group of friends who, “were all pregnant at the same time,” for example, Elaine explained, “we would spend hours talking about haemorrhoids, bras, indigestion ... It was fascinating with each other, you know ... only other pregnant women could hear that!” (Interview, 2 November 2010)

This excerpt not only illustrates some of the intimacies that are often shared amongst women at this time but also shows Elaine’s awareness that the group’s topic of conversation was only of interest to one another. In other words, one of the factors that sets the group apart from the rest of society is their common interest, and despite the fact that all women who have been pregnant will have sensed their body changing, the extent to which Elaine describes the subject is only of fascination to those who are experiencing it at the time.

A similar situation is described by Edna in relation to her experience of breastfeeding. Edna was part of a self-selecting group who chose to meet together

⁶ Doulas offer practical and emotional support to women and their families during pregnancy, childbirth and early nursing that is non-medical in nature. For more information visit www.doula.org.uk

on a regular basis to support one another. She explained how they would “always share horror stories/fears/ joys/problems, always breastfeed and always eat – it was kind of a survival/support thing” (Personal communication, 15 March 2010). In her interview she went on to say “I felt a connection with them because they were the only people that understood” (Interview, 19 November 2010).

So like Elaine, Edna met with a group of women to share intimacies and to an extent it is the nature of their conversation that sets them apart from the rest of society. However, Edna also made the comment, almost as an aside that, “we were all like freaks when it came to breastfeeding”.

It is the nature of this latter remark that illustrates another reason why women can feel to be on the margins of society during this time, and that is the discomfort that still exists within society around breastfeeding. One story that I noted down in my journal was based on a friend’s experience who said that she had felt obliged to go upstairs to breastfeed when her mother and father-in-law came to her house to visit ‘the new arrival’.

Even though attitudes are clearly changing, I would suggest that this example is still not uncommon. In August 2015 a BBC radio presenter, Alex Dyke, was suspended after making “appalling” comments about breastfeeding on air. He is quoted as having said: “Breastfeeding is unnatural. It’s the kind of thing that should be done in a quiet, private nursery. It was OK in the Stone Age when we knew no better, when people didn’t have teeth” (BBC, 2015).

Rather than getting embroiled in the debate around women’s bodies and taboos at this stage, I simply want to make the point that some of society’s continuing discomfort, particularly around the issue of breastfeeding, is another factor which serves to encourage women during their transition into motherhood to feel separate, and relatively speaking, to exist for a time on the margins of society.

According to Turner’s theory it is this sense of marginality that is not only a feature of liminality, but also helps to explain why deep and intimate relationships, or

communitas, often flourish. The fact that I have used two examples from the preliminal and postliminal phase of a woman's transition rather than the liminal phase could be explained by the porosity of the boundaries between the three stages.

Another important factor that Turner notes within the nature of these relationships is that they can be fleeting and he suggests that there is an inherent danger in trying "to cling to one [person or moment] when its present impetus is spent" (1995, p. 139). In relation to women's experiences of friendships during their transition into motherhood, this phenomenon was summed up by Maria when she used the phrase "baby friends" during her interview (Interview, 6 June 2012).

Maria was talking about women whom she had met during her pregnancy and with whom she shared a strong friendship, but had then grown apart from in subsequent years. This was also my experience. There were a number of women I met through my antenatal network who I then continued to meet with once or twice a week when our children were small. Within this group we shared very intimate details of our lives with one another that I have not shared with anyone else, but the meetings naturally petered out as the children grew older and some of the friendships faded too.

This was partly for practical reasons in that some of the women went back to work, moved house or their children began to attend a different school. However, I also sensed that sometimes when the intensity of the experiences of early motherhood passed, I had less in common with some of the women than with others. Thus from an original group of nine women, four of us met regularly and shared a strong friendship until the children started preschool, and now seven years later I am only regularly in touch with one of the women who has become a close friend.

Thus, I would argue that Turner's model of *communitas* is a useful lens through which it is possible to better understand the depth and intimacy of some of the relationships that women can experience during their transition into motherhood as well as the fleeting nature of what Maria referred to as 'baby friends'. However, I

also want to mention two inconsistencies between women's experiences of relationships during this time and van Gennep and Turner's theories.

The first relates to Turner's assertion that "distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized" (1995, p. 95), between participants during *communitas*. In terms of a woman's experience of liminality during labour, this is true. Rank or status may affect a woman's access to maternity services in many parts of the world, but it becomes largely irrelevant in the throes of a natural labour. However, during a woman's experience of pregnancy and early nursing, I would argue that it also exists, but becomes much more ambiguous.

From a personal point of view for example, I was initially taken aback by the number of women who stopped to talk to me when I was out pushing the buggy and who also turned out to be the mothers of twins. Our conversations were usually short but incredibly intense and touched on some very intimate details such as our experiences of birth and feeding. In fact, I too soon found myself approaching other women who were mothers of twins who previously I would never have dreamed of spontaneously talking to.

I was relatively unaware of their social status at the time. The desire to talk to someone with similar experiences also seemed to override any concern that I might usually have about approaching people. The intensity of these encounters reflects the spirit of *communitas* and yet, in contrast to these casual encounters, the postnatal group that I met with regularly all had similar social backgrounds to my own.

In other words, social status was largely irrelevant during the fleeting conversations that I had with other mothers of twins, but within the still temporary but more regular meetings that I had with other mothers our social background undeniably played a part. We met together in one another's homes for example, chose to do similar activities and had comparable aspirations for our children.

Based on my own experience and observations of the groups that I have seen form in antenatal classes and playgroups, I would therefore argue that whilst a degree of homogenization takes place, the role of social class and status should not be underestimated. Rather than implying that pregnant women or new mothers exist in some kind of status-less utopia, it would be more accurate to suggest that relationships that form during these times usually follow similar patterns to normal relationship formations, during which moments of homogenization arising from shared experience can occur.

A second inconsistency between my research data and Turner's model is the nature of the relationship that can exist between mothers, regardless of generation. Based on my research data and own experience there is a common bond that exists between mothers regardless of generation, within which an unwritten code of conduct seems to operate. Turner's concept of *communitas* expresses this common bond to some extent, but I want to highlight another factor which serves to complicate some of these relationships and which diverges from the concept of *communitas*.

The idea that there is an unwritten code of conduct amongst women who have become mothers is encapsulated within this extract from Monica's interview in which she describes the interactions between some of the women she had invited to her pre-birthing ritual. She explained:

not everybody shared all the bits of truth you know, and people are editing things ... I could see that that was going on. My sister was sort of looking at Tina, like (*mimics raising her eyebrow in a knowing way*) 'you don't really need to talk about that' and '... we won't cover that now, she'll learn that' (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Similarly, I wrote in my journal about an experience in which a close friend phoned to say that she was pregnant:

I felt genuinely pleased for her, but I was also acutely aware that my 'Congratulations!' was filled with hesitation ... my gut reaction was to warn her; to tell her

what it might be like and all the things that I wish I'd known (Journal entry, 24 February 2009).

After the telephone conversation, I wrote her a letter. It felt good to write my thoughts down, but in the end it felt wrong to send it. The concept of shared wisdom amongst veterans, alongside a reluctance to share it too soon, becomes clearer through Turner's concept of "a generalized social bond" (1995, p. 96) that is one of the intrinsic features of *communitas*.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that women experience this journey from novice to veteran in a simple, linear progression as van Gennep and Turner's theories seem to imply. My sense is that women's experience of motherhood follows a spiral of repeating emotions that is more diagrammatically congruent with a recurring spiral than a straight line.

An experience that illustrates this point is recalled by Adrienne Rich (1977) in which she describes meeting a 'young woman friend' on the street a few years after her own children had been babies. She wrote that her friend had:

a tiny infant against her breast, in a bright cotton sling ... I am amazed to feel in myself a passionate longing to have, once again, such a small, new being clasped against my body ... And I walk away from her drenched with memory and envy (p. 33).

Rich's description encompasses the complexity of such encounters. She is reminded of holding her own children and feels envious of this young mother, and yet at the same time she knows that the same period of existence for her was filled with ambiguity. A few pages earlier she includes an excerpt from her journal which reads: "To be caught up in waves of love and hate, jealousy even of the child's childhood; hope and fear for its maturity; longing to be free of responsibility, tied by every fibre of one's being" (1977, p. 22).

Rich does not claim to speak for all women, but the honesty of this personal reflection points to a whole range of emotions and experiences that I believe are common to women's experience of motherhood, but that do not find expression in

Turner's concept of *communitas*. I will return to the idea of recurring spirals at the end of this chapter, but for now I want to acknowledge that alongside the strong connections that can be experienced between women who are mothers, again based on their common experience of liminality, there can also be tensions as Rich's story demonstrates. I would suggest that feelings of envy or longing, especially if those emotions have not been recognised or dealt with, can damage relationships.

Indeed, whilst friendships between women who were mothers was a common theme within my data, three of my interview participants also talked about difficult relationships with other women who they had thought would be more supportive of them during their transition. Building positive and supportive relationships was also an important focus of some of the rituals that the women created.

In conclusion, the concept of *communitas* is helpful in so far as it explains some of the more unusual aspects of the relationships that women can experience during their transition, particularly in terms of their depth and intimacy as well as the fleeting nature of some of these encounters. However, *communitas* does not fully explain the range and complexity of the relationships described within my interview data. Aspects such as the unwritten code of conduct that appears to exist cross generationally and the tensions that Rich's story encapsulates deserve further investigation.

4.3.2 The Medicalization of Labour and Birth

Another strong theme that emerged out of my research data, experienced and dealt with in a variety of different ways by each of the women I spoke to, was the way in which they felt that the natural process of labour and birth had become overly medicalized. In this section, I will use van Gennep and Turner's theories surrounding a rite of passage to explore this phenomenon and the women's experiences of it in order to provide a grounding to explain the nature of some of the rituals that the women created for themselves.

One way in which the women expressed their feelings about the medicalization of their birthing experience was by describing fear. In recounting the birth of her first child in hospital, Jemma stated emphatically; “I will never face anything that frightening again” (Interview, 25 May 2007). Similarly, Ali talked about her fears in relation to the birth of her first child, recalling:

I was scared because I knew my mother really just had hated childbirth [in hospital] and that her memories of it are all just so full of tears and fears and feeling out of control. And not having her glasses on, and being on her back (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Ali went on to explain, “I wasn’t scared of the breech [having a breech baby]. I just didn’t want to go into *hospital*”.

Feelings about the medicalization of her experience were expressed in a different way by Miranda, who described it as “heart-breaking” when she found one of the babies that she had miscarried referred to in her notes as a “product of conception”, and the procedure to remove the baby from her body as “the evacuation of the products of conception” (Interview, 6 March 2012).

In another permutation, in a poem that Elaine had written about her daughter’s birth, she describes showing her baby the mountains beyond her ward’s windows and contrasts the beauty and power of the human experience of birth with the “harsh light of the hospital” and her “antiseptic surroundings” (Personal communication, 11 March 2009).

It was not that the women were ungrateful for the medical care that they had received, and a number of them mentioned feeling very lucky, in comparison to women in other countries or of previous generations. However, at the same time they expressed a palpable frustration with what often seemed to have been the overly medicalized nature of their birthing experience. As Monica explained:

it just seemed as though everything was going to be medical ... I’m blessed by me and my baby not dying in childbirth, like in the old days, but I just really wanted

there to be a different kind of labouring and birth ... that was proper midwives, that was community wisdom and that was much more related to humanising ... celebrating the strangeness of it really ... just the real hotchpotch mix (Interview, 17 August 2009).

The issues around the medicalization of childbirth are not new. Rich (1977) incorporated a history of childbirth practices through the centuries in her book, highlighting the ways in which power and patriarchy have negatively influenced procedures and understandings. The following year Mary Daly published *Gyn/Ecology*, in which she wrote: "Many feminists have noted the significance of the fact that the massacre of the wise women / healers during the witchcraze was followed by the rise of man-midwives who eventually became dignified by the name 'gynaecologist'" (1978, p. 224).

More recently, Robbie Davis-Floyd has likened the medicalization of birth in America to a new rite of passage (2003), through which society imparts its values onto women. This is a value system which, she argues, celebrates science and technology at the mother's expense. Using the model of a rite of passage, she likens a mother's openness during labour to the receptiveness of army recruits or tribal initiates after an ordeal, explaining:

The natural rhythmicity, intensification, and emotionality of the labor process is enough all by itself to put the labouring woman in a far more intensely affective state than all but the most gruelling male initiation rites can produce. As those critical hours of transition and transformation open both her cervix and category system, they render the becoming mother far more receptive to new messages than she will be before or after the birth (2003, p. 39).

This observation resonates with some of my research participants experiences, one of whom described feeling like "a vehicle" (Interview, 25 May 2007) with another woman explaining that she remembered very little of her birthing because she was "out of it" on medication (Interview, 10 May 2010).

In the course of her book, Davis-Floyd carefully lays out the ways in which the hospital system in the West has replaced traditional rites of passage; where Doctors have become the Elders and medicine and technology have replaced human wisdom and the ability to know and trust our own bodies.

According to van Gennep and Turner's model, ritual humiliation plays a central role in a traditional rite of passage because by overcoming the ordeal, initiates become equipped and strengthened to face the challenges of their new role. This reflects the natural process of labour, when a mother can be seen to be undergoing humiliation in the form of nakedness and by following her body's natural rhythms. In contrast, the involuntary humiliation that some of the women experienced through an overly medicalized birth can have the effect of undermining their belief in their own abilities, by communicating that they were unable to birth without medical intervention.

The repercussions of this have been observed by Thelma Aldcroft from her experience as a health visitor and Relate counsellor who writes that the consequences of an overly medicalized birthing experience often have the effect of "undermin[ing] women's self-esteem" (1993, p. 182) that can have long term effects both on her and her relationships with those around her.

This was certainly my experience. I hated being spoken to through my open legs as I was lying on my back. In hospital I felt completely isolated and utterly foolish. I was referred to by one nurse as "the woman with the low pain threshold" rather than by my name and I was acutely aware that I had been unable to birth my own children. I later wrote; "In hospital, I didn't become a mother, I became a patient. Any sense of confidence I had had from my long and healthy pregnancy was completely eroded by the time the children arrived" (Journal entry, 6 June 2010).

Along similar lines, Grimes points out that; "For the past two centuries we have worried more about the damage done by tradition than about the destruction wrought by science" (2000, p. 34). However, in critiquing the existing system, Davis-Floyd is careful not to advocate a single solution. In the preface to the second

edition of her book she explains; “Some women choose highly technocratic births and others choose to birth at home, but women universally desire humanistic care that is respectful, compassionate, and relationship-centred” (2003, p. xii).

In the same way, it would be inaccurate for me to suggest that there was any form of consensus amongst my research participants about the best way to birth, and the circumstances for some simply did not allow a choice. What became clear within my data however was the way in which many of the women’s rituals sought to humanize their birthing experiences and create space for their spirituality to find expression; neither of which easily found an outlet within the hospital environment at the time of birthing, in the experience of the women I interviewed.

Rather than thinking of the women’s ritualizing as niceties, I would therefore argue that some of the moments or events described were instrumental in dealing with the medicalization of the birthing process that the women either feared or experienced. Showing her daughter the mountains for example, which was depicted by Elaine in her poem, can be seen as an effort to humanize her experience of the hospital. Similarly, Edna’s creation of a ritual, one year after her birthing was an attempt to recover from her ordeal. The nature of the women’s space making also relates to their attempts to minimise the impact of hospital procedures and protocols and find expression for their spirituality, which I will describe in more detail in chapter 7.

4.3.3 The Importance of Support and Journaling

As previously mentioned, van Gennep’s model has been used across a wide variety of disciplines. In this section I want to use a critique of his hypothesis that has arisen out of the way in which the rites of passage theory has been applied in the context of coming-of-age outdoor education programmes. The critique recognises some of the differences in social context between the communities that were the focus of van Gennep’s initial study and modern day societies.

In doing so the importance of two features: ongoing support and the benefit of journaling were highlighted as crucial factors for an individual in the successful navigation and completion of a modern day rite of passage. By exploring the differences between social contexts in relation to my own research, I hope to be able to explain some of the reasons why these two features also emerged as important themes within the women's stories. Although I have already mentioned that relationships was a strong theme in my research data it is the important role of support within them that will be my focus in this section.

The model of a rite of passage has become a popular tool, particularly in North America, for coming-of-age programmes, because of the many structural similarities that appear to exist between a typical outdoor adventure trip and the first two stages of van Gennep's theory (Bell, B., 2003).

Young people, for example, are separated from their community and taken to a new environment where they face challenges during which the rules and coping mechanisms from their previous roles no longer apply. As Myerhoff illustrates: "When the initiate is stripped of all that he/she knows and understands – the sources of knowledge of self and society – he/she is likely to develop a freer, deeper understanding of the system from which he/she has been removed" (1982, p. 117).

It has been suggested however that there is a dissonance in the third phase because of some of the differences between the traditional societies which were van Gennep's focus and contemporary western culture. Cushing (1999) highlights the important role that the community plays not only in welcoming an individual back, but also in exerting pressure on them to adopt and fulfil their new role.

There is clearly a contrast between a community which has been built on years of tradition and reinforcement, creating a cultural consensus regarding what is expected from an initiate and a modern day pluralistic society in which role diversity and choice are, relatively speaking, more valued. It would be disingenuous for an education programme to suggest that it offers people the opportunity and freedom to become more fully themselves while at the same time channelling individuals

into preconceived moulds. Cushing argues that even with the new knowledge of an individual, the social pressure of their community must work alongside them for their transformation into a new role to be sustained.

The same danger of trying to transpose van Gennep's model onto contemporary western culture is also clearly relevant to my own research data. Unlike the traditional communities that were the focus of van Gennep's study, in which a mother's role and position would have been clearly defined and understood, motherhood within contemporary western society has many more choices associated with it.

The women I spoke to all varied, both in terms of the way they had chosen to birth and their approach to motherhood. Some for example had chosen to carry on working after the birth, others had decided to give up paid employment, with others feeling that they had no choice for financial reasons and needed to go back soon after the baby was born. Similarly, the women were often able to exercise choice in the way that they wanted to birth, whether in a hospital or home based, midwife or doula assisted.

Amidst this diversity however, the women also talked about tensions and ambiguities. Recalling her early days of motherhood, Edna said:

[My family] had never experienced anything like it [what we were going through] ... my sister would say: 'Well, why can't you breastfeed?' and, you know: 'Why are you doing it so strangely?' ... I'd been to a breastfeeding clinic, but my Mum was like, 'That's so weird' (Interview, 19 November 2010).

In another example, Elaine expressed frustration at the way in which society seemed to treat her as a pregnant woman, saying;

I loved being pregnant and had a healthy experience ... but I was incensed that society – offering maternity clothes with ruffles and frills – tried to infantilise me, at what I felt to be the most powerful time in my life (Personal communication, 11 March 2009).

So, through the women's apparent freedom they also experienced resistance and tensions during their transition into motherhood, in Edna's case, with members of her own family and for Elaine, from society in general. This lack of community consensus not only marks a difference between the women's experience of transition and van Gennep's model, but also according to Cushing, without social support a woman's transformation into motherhood is far harder to sustain.

Although a change has clearly occurred with or without this support, the tensions and resistance that these two examples illustrate have the potential to undermine a new mother's confidence, let alone her ability to do things differently or reimagine motherhood for herself. This excerpt from Edna's initial response to my questionnaire certainly seems to support this theory:

if I were suddenly to have announced that I were to do a personal ... ritual then others would just think me weird ... However, were ritual a part of everyday life then I think my experiences may not have been so negative because they would have been celebrated/valued/respected
(Personal communication, 15 March 2010).

Interestingly, rather than rejecting van Gennep's theory as a model that can be transposed into a modern day context, Cushing (1998, p. 12) suggests six ideas that might enable a more successful transformation in the context of outdoor education. Of these six, it is pertinent to this study to note that she highlights the importance of long term support for individuals who have just undergone a transformative experience, and advocates journal writing as a channel through which participants can express and reflect upon their story.

As I have already intimated these two features were both common within the women's stories and ritualizing. With regards to journal writing, half of the women in my research sample talked about the importance to them of keeping a journal during their transition into motherhood. For some, it was a means of recording events and feelings whilst for others it acted as a tool to reflect upon and work through some of the more challenging elements of their experience.

The other theme from Cushing's critique that I want to highlight is the importance of ongoing support for an individual. The apparent choices and underlying tensions that I have already mentioned as being part of many women's experience led to some of my research participants creating rituals for themselves that created and strengthened a support network around them.

Three of the women for example chose to hold an event prior to their birthing to which they invited women who were already close to them. These events, which I refer to later as Mother Blessings, had the dual role of not only helping the mothers-to-be to prepare for the challenges ahead but also to foster a support network.

Another important source of support that was mentioned came from people whose services some of the women had employed such as doulas, homeopaths and acupuncturists. Although each of these people had particular skills, my impression was that part of their role, and their importance during the transition, came from the care and support that they offered to my interviewees as women, rather than as a vehicle for the baby. In describing her relationship with her homeopath and the role she played, for example, Ruth said that she was a "guide through the desert" and a "great healer" (Interview, 10 May 2010).

The continuity of support was mentioned as a factor that was perceived to be missing within modern day maternity services and was often exacerbated by the fact that most of the women in my study no longer lived close to any family support network. The women who were invited to the Mother Blessings all had long established relationships to the mothers-to-be, but often doulas, homeopaths and acupuncturists were described in this way too. For example, Ali explained:

my doula, I'm sure, was a central part of why my births were safe, because she knew me ... I had to talk about my bum eternally with the doula you know and I couldn't have done it with - she'd known me for years, so she was able to just hold me and stroke me, whilst I was experiencing this, just awful pain (Interview, 19 November 2010).

In spite of the fact that it is well documented that the continuity of care and support is important for new mothers in terms of their postnatal health (Wray, 2011; Oakley, 1986) I would argue from my own experience and from my research data that this is not routinely the case. Those who chose to employ the services of others or who sought to create communities of support around themselves did so to supplement the services of the midwives whose training and focus is on the medical aspects of birth and whose shift patterns do not always allow them to establish strong relationships with the women in their care.

In conclusion, the nature of the support with which eight of the ten women I interviewed sought to surround themselves with during their transition into motherhood can be characterised in terms of trust and continuity, which echoes the kind of support that Cushing advocates. Half of the women also talked about the important role that journaling played in recording and working through the changes that their experience entailed. Thus Cushing's critique of van Gennep's theory has helped me to highlight two more common features within the women's ritualising, as well as enabling me to explain some of the reasons behind them.

4.3.4 Is Labour an Experience of Status Reversal?

In the previous section I explored some of the problems associated with trying to transpose van Gennep's model onto contemporary situations. I now want to focus on a weakness inherent within the theory itself which, as in the first section when I focused on relationships, relates to the gender bias of his work.

The issue arises from van Gennep's claim that his threefold system can be universally applied. Indeed, Grimes suggests that van Gennep made a serious mistake in using initiation as the model for all other rites of passage, and by using male initiations as the model for all initiations (2000).

Having said that, a number of researchers have used the basic threefold structure of his model whilst also highlighting the gender bias of his work. Rita Gross for example, in her analysis of Aboriginal women's initiation describes the three phases

in terms of withdrawal, seclusion and return (1980, p. 280). Nicola Slee in her research on women's faith development outlines a process of alienation, awakening and relationality (2004). Similarly, Bruce Lincoln's analysis of women's initiation rites across five cultures describes the process in terms of enclosure, metamorphosis and emergence (1981, p. 101).

In fact, rather than dismissing van Gennep's theory altogether due to its gender bias, I want to draw on Caroline Walker Bynum's gender critique of his work (1992), and more particularly Turner's development of it in order to explore a further dimension of my research data.

Walker Bynum is a historian of religion and her critique arises out of her work on medieval women saints and mystics. Although she accepts that Turner looks extensively and with great subtlety at women's lives and rituals in both his theory and fieldwork, she states that it is his inability to also be able to stand *with* women that leads him to make inaccurate assumptions about their experiences.

Her critique centres on van Gennep's concept of liminality, within which Turner suggested that images of status reversal play a central part (1995). Walker Bynum cites the example of Francis of Assisi whose life story as told by the biographer Bonaventure conforms to this model, whereby at key moments of crisis such as conversion and death he adopts images of poverty, nudity, weakness and femaleness. Walker Bynum claims that Turner's mistake was to assume that the opposite was therefore true for women;

when Turner attempts to stand with the inferior [women], he assumes symmetry – that is, he assumes that the inferior are exactly the reverse of the superior [men]. If the superior in society generate images of lowliness in liminality, the inferior will generate images of power (1992, p. 33).

By attempting to stand *with* women and look at how their stories really work, Walker Bynum recognises that they were less likely to use images of gender reversal, and that they, "could not take off their clothes and walk away from their

fathers or husbands, as Francis did. Simple social facts meant that most women's dramas were incomplete" (1992, p. 43).

In a more general point she goes on to state that images generated by inferior groups, not just women, are usually not reversals of status at all but involve a different ordering of society in which hierarchies are abolished, and the imagery is not that of humiliation and triumph, but struggle (1992, p. 34).

Clearly the historical context of the two groups of women is very different, and Walker Bynum is careful not to suggest that her own findings should be understood to apply to all women. However, in relation to my own data her critique of Turner highlights an important issue, even though at first glance, my data seems to acquiesce to Turner's theory more than to Walker Bynum's critique.

A woman's experience of natural childbirth at one level involves elements of Turner's so called status reversal during the liminal phase as I have already mentioned. Elaine for example, recalled in her journal that during labour "I had pushed off all my clothing, except socks" (Journal entry, transcribed). Of the same experience, a close friend who had been there as a birth coach wrote in her own journal, "Elaine looked like a Mythological Beast with 2 heads; each moving independent of the other" (Journal entry, transcribed).

Although the first reference to nudity seems to mirror the concept of status reversal during the liminal phase, which in this case is the experience of labour, Turner actually suggested that a woman's experience would be the opposite to that of a man's. Having said that, neither Elaine nor her friend would have considered themselves to be inferior to men. They were both highly paid, professional women, whose social position and expectations would have been very different to the women of Walker Bynum's study.

It could then be argued that contemporary women of high status mirror the status reversal of men during life crisis transitions, but this example from my data suggests a further complication. The image of a labouring woman as some kind of mythical

creature is both a status demotion and an elevation. In other words she becomes beastlike as opposed to human which suggests a status demotion, as does her nudity, whilst at the same time reminding the onlooker of mythological power, which could be interpreted as status elevation.

Rather than one or the other then, this image can be more accurately interpreted as a depiction of struggle as Walker Bynum suggests is common amongst inferior groups in which the idea of hierarchy is rejected and polarities become intertwined. This is also a common feature of feminist thought, which both of these women would identify with. Based on the stories of natural labour that I have heard as part of this research, I would argue that the concept of struggle is more reflective of a woman's experience of natural labour than the idea of a status reversal in either direction.

This example, coupled with Walker Bynum's critique, raises important questions about: Turner's assumption of symmetry; the impact that changes in a woman's social status can have upon our understanding of van Gennep's model; and what we think of as status reversal. However, for the purposes of this study, I want to affirm the image of struggle in relation to a natural labour and suggest that it is only because of the involvement of outside agencies, such as certain medical interventions, as described in the previous section, that the women in my study talked explicitly about their experience in terms of a reversal of status.

A second useful observation that Walker Bynum makes with regards to my own study is that based on the lives of the women in her research, their experience of transition was often about becoming more fully themselves rather than status (1992, p. 50). This offers a very different trajectory through which to think about a woman's transition into motherhood which I will explore more fully in the final section of this chapter.

Before I leave the theme of status however, I want to examine its role in the third and final phase of van Gennep's three fold model. In other words, rather than simply moving on to talk about the women's transition into motherhood in terms of

'becoming more fully oneself', I want to question whether the concept of status does play a part in a woman's experience of the final phase of transition, and if so, what impact that has on her sense of identity.

4.3.5 The Role of Status and Identity in a Woman's Rite of Passage into Motherhood

According to van Gennep's model, a change of identity is an intrinsic feature of the third and final phase of transition within an individual's rite of passage. The boys of Turner's fieldwork for example, are believed by the Ndembu people to have become men, which is understood not only in terms of an elevation of status but also as a transformation of identity. Before I discuss the concept of a change of identity however, I want to establish whether the women in my research sample experienced their final phase of transition into motherhood as an elevation or demotion of status.

At one level, I would argue that motherhood is understood within our society to be an elevation of status. In my interview with Miranda for example, she talked about her discomfort when people asked her how many children she has. She explained: "I always say, 'I could only have one' ... otherwise I feel that people are saying, 'Why didn't she have more?' They start to judge you, or imagine why" (Interview, 6 March 2012). Certainly the pain of Miranda's story in which she recounted a string of miscarriages is an illustration of the yearning that women often experience in order to have children and in some cases the lengths to which people will go to make it possible.

It is also the case that the majority of the women in my study chose to become pregnant and those who did not, chose to keep the baby. This element of choice coupled with the sense that to become a mother is the normal thing to do after a certain age, and have more than one child, helps to illustrate why at one level becoming a mother is regarded as an elevation of status.

On the other hand however, I think that a gulf exists between this perception and the reality of how it can *feel* to become a mother, particularly within the early phase of this transition. From a personal point of view for example this was a period in which I swapped my ‘status’ as the minister of three churches to that of a stay-at-home-mum. When I was asked, ‘What do you do?’ I found myself replying in the past tense; ‘I used to be a minister.’

It was also a phase during which I lost my financial independence, experienced extreme tiredness and spent my time trying to create some semblance of routine out of the 24/7 demands for food, immediate attention and a change of nappies. In order to substantiate these claims however, I want to draw on three examples from my research data and wider reading.

The first point that I want to mention is the mundane and often unpleasant nature of the jobs that are an intrinsic part of early motherhood, which was brilliantly illustrated by Jemma in a speech at her daughter’s Naming Ceremony. Jemma used the template of a popular children’s book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) to describe her experiences:

On Saturday she had ... one punch in the face from her [toddler] son, two piles of baby vomit to clear up, one episode of the Tweenies, followed by a screaming fit because she turned the telly off, three spoons of sweet potato in her hair, and one hour of teething and half a poo in the potty, the other half deposited in the middle of the living room floor. Later on she had one row with her husband, no time to herself, and two rather large glasses of white wine (Transcript of ceremony, 5 July 2007).

Although Jemma portrays her experiences in a humorous way it is the relentless nature of these tasks that makes some of the realities of early motherhood feel less like an elevation of status. In addition, for some of the women I interviewed there was a stark contrast between the status and control of their previous employment and the relative chaos of bringing up young children. Based on her interviews with seventeen women during the first seven months following birth, Julie Wray, who is a senior lecturer in midwifery, reported that women experience the realities of

motherhood in a number of ways including “mundane and boring” as well as “frustrating and unpredictable” (2011, p. 188).

A second feature of Jemma’s characterization of life as the mother of young children is implied in her mention of having ‘one row with her husband’. Again, tensions in relationships, particularly with partners was also a common feature in Wray’s findings, in which she mentions the women in her study making comparisons between their lives and that of their partner’s in terms of workload, loss of freedoms and levels of tiredness (2011, p. 193).

At a personal level I know that this was also a common and emotive topic amongst the women I regularly met up with when my own children were small. Similarly, from my research data, Maria mimicked a typical conversation between her and her husband;

‘I’m more tired than you are’ and, (she laughs) ‘I’m doing more than you are’ and ‘I’m more tired than you are’... ‘I haven’t eaten!’ ‘I haven’t eaten.’ ‘I haven’t had a shower yet!’ ... I feel like I’ve recovered from that now ... I thought for years that having children would be easy, but it’s hard ... [I] was very conscious of saving our relationship (Interview, 6 June 2012).

The third and final theme that I want to highlight from my research data is the ongoing health concerns that the women described having during this time. Research shows that health problems for women after birth are very common, persist over time and tend to go unrecognised (Albers, 2000). Explaining exactly why this is the case lies beyond the scope of this study, but one of the factors that has become clear to me is precisely to do with the gulf that I have suggested exists between society’s perceptions and the reality of early motherhood.

Edna, for example, described to me how she had breastfed her daughter for the first year in spite of the fact that this had caused Edna immense pain and seems to have played a part in the ongoing health problems of both her and her daughter. In trying to explain her determination at the time to breastfeed, Edna said that she

was exhausted and so couldn't think clearly, and that it helped her to feel that she had an element of control in a situation in which she felt largely helpless. She also said: "When I think back to that time, I think, what an idiot I was ... but I really wanted to be a proper mum" (Interview, 19 November 2010).

In other words, on top of the tiredness she felt and the sense that she was not in control, Edna clearly equated the ability to breastfeed with being a 'proper' mum. Rather than asking for help however, Edna explained: "I felt like, I've had this baby, this is my fault, I made this choice to do it. I can't expect the rest of the world to revolve around me ... it was absolute hell".

Similarly, Ward and Mitchell, who conducted focus groups with forty nine mothers reported that some of the women were unable to talk about their feelings for fear of being judged negatively (2004). Based on my research data I want to suggest that the gulf that exists between perception and reality forces many women to keep quiet about the problems they are facing, which in turn affects their mental health.

Interestingly, although none of the women in my research sample were officially diagnosed with any form of mental illness at the time, six of the ten women I interviewed mentioned concerns about the state of their mental health during their transition into motherhood. Due to the particularly sensitive nature of this issue I have chosen not to use any of the women's names or pseudonyms, but the excerpts below help to illustrate my point:

"I was kind of a bad omen"

"The experience was devastating and I thought myself close to mental illness at the time."

"I was just paranoid, obsessively paranoid."

"It was about survival, about recovering my mental health."

"I definitely had bouts of depression."

“It led to feelings of self-harm and desperate self-hatred and failure.”

I have used three examples drawn from my research data to illustrate the way in which the realities of early motherhood often do not feel like an elevation of status, although I acknowledge that society’s perceptions of the role should not be underestimated. Rather, instead of motherhood being a straightforward change in status as van Gennep’s model suggests a great deal of ambiguity surrounds the role, through which women often feel tensions and frustration.

Although not in direct relation to the theme of status or the model of a rite of passage, this issue was first highlighted by Oakley (1980) when she pointed out that it was unusual, particularly for first time mothers, to easily adapt to their new role. Since then other research (focusing, as Oakley did, on listening to mothers themselves) has confirmed her findings.

For example, Choi et al (2005, p. 168) argued that “it is hardly surprising that some degree of unhappiness and negative feelings occur” when women’s expectations of motherhood contrast so starkly with reality. Oakley and Choi’s insights, and the three examples from my own data, reinforce my argument that the ambiguous status of motherhood negatively affects the way in which women are able to embrace their new identities as mothers.

In a final section, before I explore an alternative to van Gennep’s model, I want to introduce five other factors that create added pressures on women, and thus serve to complicate their transition into motherhood. They include: Celebrity Mums; Machine Moms; Intensive Mothering, the concept that it is possible to Bounce Back quickly after childbirth and Stereotypes. I will argue that these can not only culminate in widening the gulf between women’s perceptions and the realities of early motherhood but they can also have an effect on their new identity as mothers.

4.3.6 Five Contemporary Motherhood Myths

Four of the influences that I have just mentioned can be characterized as unrealistic standards of motherhood, as Caroline Gatrell observes:

Despite the fact that increasing numbers of professional women are returning to work while their children are still babies, the standards by which these women are measured (and by which they measure themselves) in relation to 'good' mothering are higher than ever before (2005, p. 61).

Although Gatrell's focus is on working mums, three of the four influences that I want to mention are not limited to this group. The first is a case in point, and arises out of the carefully packaged fantasies of the Celebrity Mum created by the media. Within these portrayals women appear to 'have it all' in terms of having angelic children, a fulfilling job, plenty of money, the perfect figure and a wonderful partner. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels have analysed thirty years of media images in the US to show how the idealisation of motherhood has served to undermine women. In relation to the Celebrity Mum phenomenon, they write:

Rising out of the ashes of feminism, and repudiating its critique of the narrow confines of middle-class motherhood, the celebrity mom profile was an absolutely crucial tool in the media construction of maternal guilt and insecurity, as well as the romanticizing of motherhood, in the 1980s and beyond (2004, p. 113).

Even if women don't choose to buy magazines, these headlines and photographs are prolific across the television, social media and internet. The collage of idealism that a Celebrity Mum profile promotes is a long way from the reality of most mothers' experience of early nursing. As Wray commented in relation to her own findings:

I received plenty of comments about celebrity mothers and the media frenzy directed in particular at Victoria Beckham. On the one level some women talked about how media portrayals of motherhood were disconnected from the *real world* and *reality* ... Ironically, such talk

often extended into issues about body image and weight loss (2011, p. 185).

In 2010 a survey across the UK of 6,226 mothers' experiences of weight management, healthy eating and obesity issues highlighted the existence of intense pressure on mothers from media coverage of "svelte celebrities" to lose their post-pregnancy baby weight (Netmums and RCM, 2010).

The second factor that I want to highlight relates more specifically to women who return to work after the birth of their baby. In her book, *Misconceptions*, Naomi Wolf focuses on the world of work, where she describes the phenomenon of the 'Machine Mom' who is "the ideal of the superfunctional mother/worker, who is able to work at top capacity up to the due date, takes one to three months off to deliver, nurture and bond, finds top-notch child care, and returns to work" (2002, p. 194).

This unrealistic 'ideal' has emerged, she suggests, in part from the egalitarian language of second wave feminism that often insisted that women could do the job just like men. Thus, she argues that working women have found themselves;

covertly coerced ... to delegate the details of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood to some offstage setting – as if all this were some messy, slightly alarming private hobby, like taxidermy or beekeeping, to be dealt with strictly in one's off hours and kept politely out of the field of vision of clients and co-workers (2002, pp. 194-5).

The pressures of work and home life are thus further compounded by the compulsion to maintain the illusion that you can cope.

The third pressure is often referred to within the literature as Intensive Mothering (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1998) which, Stone argues, has evolved out of; "the parenting industry: the complex of institutions for monitoring, assessing, and intervening into the behavior of parents and the development of children, staffed by health workers, therapists, and childcare and parenting professionals and experts" (Stone, 2012, p. 17).

Notwithstanding the fact that this industry is aimed at parents, because in the majority of families it is women rather than men who retain the primary responsibility for childcare, this focus and burden usually resides with the mother. Thus, whether or not a mother works, pressures exists upon her to keep ‘her’ children safe, happy, intellectually challenged and healthy at all times.

The final standard relates to a woman’s ability to Bounce Back after childbirth. This was the focus of Wray’s PhD, in which she concluded that women experience a trajectory of recovery;

however the time span was much longer than that cited within professional literature and policy documents ... the notion of full recovery and return to the prepregnant state by six weeks was considered to be a fantasy and was disconnected from how these women experienced recovery (2011, p. 122).

Based on what the women said and felt rather than ‘expert’ opinion, Wray concluded that by seven months, the women she interviewed without exception felt that they had bounced back or were well on the way to moving forward. She also observed that the women tended to judge their sense of recovery in terms of beginning to have enough “me time” to look after themselves as well as their baby and of being in control (2011, p. 175).

So far I have established that the women within my research sample experienced ambiguity in relation to the status of motherhood and that other factors exist which serve to further complicate this transition by creating unrealistic standards by which women are judged and often judge themselves. The fifth pressure that I want to focus on relates to Stereotypes and was mentioned by Jemma in terms of her fear of being “forced into mother stereotypes” (Interview, 25 May 2007). Later she added:

I think that one of the most terrifying things for me is suddenly, this is it! My life is over! And now I’m going to watch my children do things ... it’s all finished for me ...

I've had my kids and I'm done. I've missed my chance at life and I have real depressions about that.

In these examples, Jemma not only struggles with the Stereotypes of motherhood that she fears being squashed into, but she also describes her fear of another stereotype which suggests that once a woman has had a child, her life is over. This theme is examined by Alison Stone who has written about the relationship between subjectivity and the maternal body. Stone argues that in western civilization there has been a persistent tendency to assume that in order to become a true individual, a person must separate themselves from their mother, and thus: "She is seen as the figure whom one must leave behind, and hence she is assumed to be the background to the selfhood of others but not herself a self or (in modernity) a subject" (2012, p. 11).

So, alongside the temporary loss of freedom that usually accompanies the birth of a child, Stone explains some of the background to Jemma's fear of her life being over. Stone goes on to suggest that this same assumption leads many so-called experts to fail to treat mothers as subjects in their own right, whilst also expecting mothers themselves not to feel that they are subjects.

This links back to the point I made earlier about women feeling unable to share any of the challenges that they face on becoming mothers for fear of being judged. Stone explains that these are not logically coherent arguments but rather a web of associations that have filtered down and are now an intrinsic part of our culture that affect the way that we think.

In conclusion, I have used the model of a rite of passage as a lens through which to explore the themes of relationship and status that emerged in a variety of different ways from my research data. I have also introduced five additional pressures, that I have dubbed 'motherhood myths', which I have argued further serve to complicate a woman's transition into motherhood, and go on to affect her ability to easily adopt her new identity. These themes help to explain the background out of which the women's rituals emerged.

However, there were also times in which the model of a rite of passage did not accurately reflect my data and so I want to conclude this chapter by introducing a slightly different pattern, based on my interview data, which tries to reflect the experiences of the women's transition more accurately, as well as incorporate some of the ambiguities that I have highlighted.

4.4 Beyond van Gennep and Turner – A Model Reflecting Women's Experience of Pregnancy, Childbirth and The Early Years

In this chapter I have considered the journey into motherhood as a rite of passage, in part to reinforce the fact that childbirth involves an important transition for a woman as well as for a child. In this final section I want to introduce and explore a slightly different pattern that is more inclusive of diversity and more in keeping with the recurring pattern of a woman's emotional journey through motherhood that I have observed. Rather than a threefold model, I have chosen to explore a fourfold sequence based on the pattern of the seasons.

Exploring the connections between women's bodies and nature is not a new idea within feminist writing, although it is not without controversy. Some believe that celebrating the connections between the two reinforces traditional stereotypes within patriarchal oppression, in which women have been associated with the body and nature in contrast to men who have been thought of in terms of culture, the spirit and transcendence (Ortner, 1974).

However, whilst recognizing this history, others have also suggested that women's connectedness to nature can be an important source of power and insight. Rich for example wrote: "Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny" (1977, p. 39).

Similarly, Carol Christ writes;

It seems to me that women must positively name the power that resides in their bodies and their sense of closeness to nature and use this new naming to transform the pervasive cultural and religious devaluation of nature and the body (1995, p. 53).

I have been inspired by this writing and vision, and by my own sense that the connections between women's stories of birthing and nature are too closely aligned to ignore. To begin with, as I have already suggested, this can be portrayed through the fourfold pattern of the seasons, which in turn separates a woman's experiences of labour and birth. While the two happen in close proximity to one another, from a mother's perspective the challenges of labour are quite different from the moment of birth. I will describe the nature of each phase of the transition in relation to the seasons in a moment, but first I want to show how a woman's experience of childbirth might be understood in terms of this fourfold pattern.

Throughout this chapter I have used van Gennep's threefold structure of:

PRELIMINAL

LIMINAL

POSTLIMINAL

which can also be understood in terms of,

SEPARATION

TRANSITION

INCORPORATION

or,

PREGNANCY

LABOUR & BIRTH

EARLY NURSING

By relating the women's experiences to each of the four seasons, the pattern now looks like this:

PREGNANCY

LABOUR

BIRTH

EARLY NURSING

AUTUMN

WINTER

SPRING

SUMMER

The seasons feature within a wide range of feminist literature such as the way in which Miriam Therese Winter draws out aspects of the stories of women in the

Bible through the characteristics of different seasons (1959). In terms of a woman's experience of childbirth, I am suggesting that useful connections can be made between pregnancy and autumn as they are both times of change and letting go. Likewise labour and winter are periods during which it is necessary to dig deep in order to survive; times in which we can experience darkness, loss and pain.

We are already familiar with thinking of spring as a time of birth and new opportunities; with moments of exhilaration and relief as we sense that warmer weather and lighter days are on their way. Similarly, useful parallels can also be drawn between summer and the period of early nursing. The intensity of the need to nurture for example echoes the sometimes overwhelming heat of August. We also associate the summer with a time of reflection and recuperation; a period in which we can begin to relax into a different rhythm of being.

I have made these connections based on my own associations with the seasons, which brings me to the first benefit of this pattern. Unlike van Gennep's model which he suggested could be applied universally, irrespective of culture or gender, the nature of the seasons implies diversity. So, just as people have different views as to their favourite season, and experience each season in different ways, it is important to recognise the variations that exists within every women's experience of childbirth and motherhood, one from another and from child to child.

Even within my own, small research sample, whilst I have drawn out some common themes, each story of birthing was unique. Recognising this has important implications for professionals who work with new mothers as well as mothers themselves, particularly in terms of making comparisons of what is perceived to be normal, or with the carefully fabricated media portrayals of Celebrity Mums as previously mentioned. A pattern through which to understand motherhood that recognises diversity is therefore important.

Another variation between women's experiences that is also highlighted through this model is that the pattern of the seasons that we are familiar with in the northern hemisphere or in the UK is by no means universal. The stories of the small

group of women I have interviewed are importantly contextual. The experiences of women from other social and cultural backgrounds cannot be assumed to be the same and must also be heard.

Even though, as I have suggested, the women I spoke to faced particular challenges they can also be understood to be in a relatively privileged position in comparison to others. Changes in women's working practices alongside the introduction of the pill⁷ are both examples of the way in which more choice and opportunities are now available to an increased number of women compared to those of previous generations. The pattern of the seasons therefore highlights the important point that women do not all experience childbirth or the transition into motherhood in the same way.

A second helpful feature of this pattern is just as there are positive and negative aspects to each of the seasons, there are good moments and difficulties inherent within every phase of a woman's transition and experience of motherhood. Rather than thinking in terms of a rite of passage resulting in an elevation of status, this pattern guides women away from thinking of arriving at a fixed point after which everything will be wonderful. As Oakley acknowledges, "the dominant ideology ... is still that ... a good mother is always basically content, and children are, essentially, wonderful repositories of nothing but joy for those who bear and look after them" (1986, p. 6).

Rather than wishing away a particular phase of early weaning or yearning for a moment in the past, the cycle of the seasons encourages women to live in the moment, recognising the difficulties and benefits of every experience, thus avoiding the temptation to think in terms of polarities as Rich suggests: "To acknowledge a cyclic change of aspects ... is to acknowledge that process and continuity embrace

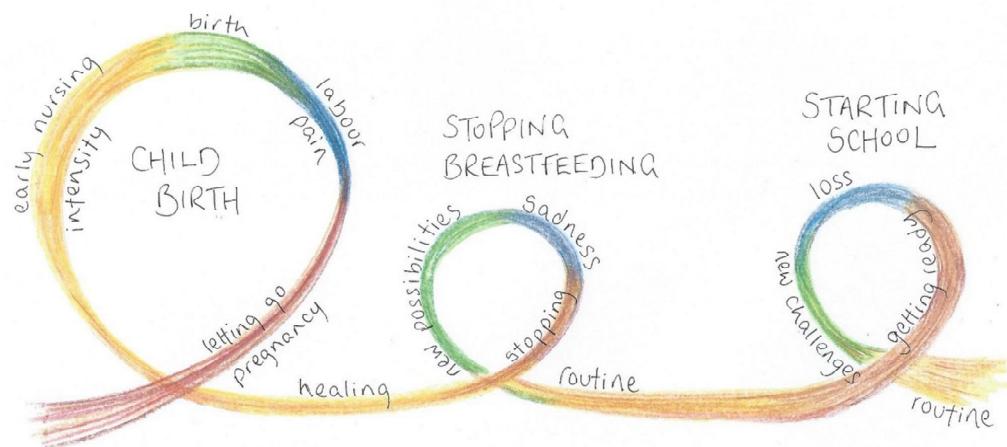
⁷ The Pill is an oral form of contraception first made available through the National Health Service to women in 1961.

both positive and negative events – although, as parts of a process, events are less likely to become stamped as purely ‘positive’ or ‘negative’” (1977, p. 116).

The cyclical nature of the seasons brings me to my third point, because unlike van Gennep’s linear process, the model of the seasons suggests a cyclical and thus repetitive pattern which I have argued is more akin to women’s experience of motherhood. In other words, many of the experiences of later maternity mirror this same cycle. They may not be felt with the same intensity, but a mother can experience a similar pattern of emotions at various stages of her child’s development.

For example, it is usually necessary to plan and make alternative arrangements towards the end of breastfeeding (autumn). A mother may feel relief, sadness or a mixture of both as this phase of intimacy passes as well as having to cope with her child’s reactions to the change (winter). As the routine of breastfeeding is left behind, new opportunities are embraced as the child begins to drink from a bottle, is introduced to food and the mother experiences more freedom (spring). The new opportunities then become part of a normal routine (summer), before the next process of change begins.

Similarly, as a child goes to school, leaves home, perhaps finds a partner or has their own children, a similar pattern of emotions can be experienced by the mother. That is not to imply each phase is the same length as the first time around, or the second, or every woman experiences each transition in the same way. Rather, as Figure 1 shows, I am suggesting a similar pattern of emotions can occur, and repeats throughout the continuum of a child’s development.



Colour Key:

AUTUMN

WINTER

SPRING

SUMMER

Figure 1: Cycles of Change

The fourth and final point I want to make with regard to the pattern of the seasons and the way in which it is reflected within women's transition and experience of motherhood is the idea of continuity. The belief that it is important for a mother to let go of her children, particularly if they are male is encapsulated in Freud's idea of the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1965) and in spite of widespread critique, this separation theory is still evident within more contemporary writing (Kristeva, 1996).

Yet Alison Stone suggests a different theory of maternity which includes periods of sadness and loss, but is also characterised by a relationship of "connection and differentiation" between mother and child, rather than separation (2012, p. 164). Like the cycle of the seasons, Stone's work suggests both continuity and change, which is important both in terms of encouraging women to embrace their children's development and new freedoms whilst at the same time believing that a continuing relationship is possible.

Clearly, in some people's experience this process can become broken. Similarly, social factors can complicate these transitions. However, it is also the case that for

some women like Jemma who become mothers, thinking that their life is over once they have children is debilitating. The thought that the relationship has a limited timespan can also be difficult. A pattern that suggests change and continuity could therefore be empowering for women as they think about the present as well as the future both in terms of their lives as women and their role as mothers.

In conclusion, I have used the pattern of the seasons to describe some of the themes arising from my data that were either hidden or distorted within van Gennep's model. It acknowledges the importance of diversity within women's experience of childbirth and motherhood and suggests an alternative to thinking in terms of polarities. It seeks to recognise the repeating pattern of emotions that can be experienced by a mother during her child's development whilst also supporting the view that a continuing, albeit changing relationship is possible.

Importantly it also avoids thinking about motherhood in terms of status and instead suggests a model which is more about self-discovery: that with the turn of each new season and the passing of every cycle a woman can learn more about herself, and thus become more fully herself, in the way that Walker Bynum suggested. This process of reflection is, I believe, a crucial aspect of any woman's journey through motherhood without which a healthy acceptance of her identity as a mother is less likely. In the following two chapters I will also argue that ritual can play a powerful role within this process.

CHAPTER 5: RITUALS

Birth

I don't have a clear memory of the moment of my own children's birth. I recall the surgeon offering to take photos, but I didn't really want to remember it in that way.

That moment was not included in Mary's story either. We are simply told that 'she gave birth to her firstborn son', but I still think that she would have experienced it. A moment that was ... overwhelming.

For me, that 'moment' came over a week later, when the trials and pressures of the hospital and trying to breastfeed were behind us, and I remember walking into the lounge at home and seeing the twins properly for the first time.

Thankfully, I don't believe that that moment happens just once. It can occur again and again as a child grows up. For me, it happens when I sit beside their beds at night and watch them sleeping. It breaks through in times of exasperation, when I feel as though I am about to burst, and then the moment is transformed by a look or a smile, and we end up laughing. When, on a walk one Sunday, I was showing my daughter Ella the catkins and pussy willow along the canal bank that my own Mum had liked so much. Later when we got home, I heard Ella speaking authoritatively to one of her brothers about fuzzy willow, and it made me smile, my head suddenly flooded with memories.

To borrow a phrase from D H Lawrence's poem 'Shadows', I find myself 'dipped again in God'.

Indeed, we are told that Mary 'treasured' and 'pondered' the words of the shepherds in her heart, just as the women's rituals are moments that they took to ponder, reflect upon and recognise particular times or encounters.

In my experience, motherhood has not been a permanent state of bliss, but a journey which has been punctuated by moments such as these.

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I focused on some of the major themes from my research data in order to provide an experience based context out of which the women's rituals emerged. In this chapter I continue this mapping exercise by outlining the academic and historical contexts to which these rituals are also related. Firstly however, I want to re-emphasize three areas I have excluded from this study.

By concentrating specifically on rituals designed to support women, I am purposefully excluding services of Baptism, Thanksgiving or Dedication that are currently offered by churches but focus predominantly on the child. Although some of these liturgies include the mention of parents and wider family they also fail to differentiate a mother's transition, whose journey is related but importantly distinct from that of her partner, existing children or baby.

That being said, I am aware that services such as baptism can play an important role in establishing and publicly marking the new identity of a mother within her social networks and wider community. Allison Fenton has recently done research based on working class women in the North East of England for whom she argues, baptism is a way of buying social capital. In order to be seen by others to be 'doing the right thing', and thus being a 'good mother', she argues that baptisms can help women to establish their new identities which in turn helps their social standing.⁸ Although baptisms may be being used in this way however I want to highlight the fact that they were not originally designed with this intention.

Secondly, I want to reiterate that this study focuses exclusively on a woman's transition into motherhood through pregnancy and childbirth. In doing so, I recognise that there are other journeys into motherhood, such as through adoption, surrogacy or marriage that are also deep transitional times for women. By limiting the focus of my research I do not want to give the impression that these motherhoods are not equally valid or that rituals are not also important within

⁸ This information is based on a telephone conversation with Allison (27.4.15) whose thesis was due to be submitted in the summer of 2015.

these transitions. Rather, I have purposefully restricted my focus in order to create a rich accumulation of data in the hope that it might provide a wide range of adaptable resources which can be used in the future to meet a variety of needs.

Lastly, I need to reinforce the point that my primary interest has been to draw together rituals that support a woman's transition into motherhood and thus the material described within the next two chapters is an intermingling of Christian rites and traditions alongside other forms of more diverse spirituality. At times this has created a tension between data and theory or between the original intention of a ritual and my interpretation of it, but where this is the case I have strived to be transparent.

With these three provisos in mind I now want to describe the outline of this chapter which is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the academic field of ritual studies in order to establish a working definition through which to describe and categorize my research data. The second section begins with a personal reflection to illustrate how it felt at the time of my own birthing not to be aware of any resources to help me to mark or navigate any aspect of my transition. Based on my subsequent research I then explain some of the reasons for this, followed by an overview of current related resources, and finally an exploration of some additional motherhood rituals that I have since discovered. This will help to provide a historical context through which to situate and analyse my data.

5.2 The Academic Context

5.2.1 Creating a Working Definition

It is difficult to clearly define the word ritual because the term has a range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Colloquially for example people might use the word to describe something that they do every year, such as the ritual of putting up stockings on Christmas Eve, or it is used in relation to a repeated daily activity such as cleaning your teeth. In terms of the former, ritual is more likely to be seen as something positive and nostalgic, whilst in the latter it is

used to describe a much more mundane activity. Equally, in my own Free Church setting, ritual can often be used in a derogatory way to describe something that is perceived to have lost its meaning.

Within academic scholarship, the notion of ritual first emerged as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience. Since then, many other definitions of ritual have been developed as a way of analysing religion, society and culture and have traditionally seen ritual as something that is fixed and formulaic.

In relation to religion, much ritual theory has evolved from the work of Émile Durkheim (1976) whose model was based on a dualistic understanding in which the world was divided between the sacred and profane. Within the sacred realm, religion was seen as a combination of rites and beliefs, with rites understood to be secondary to beliefs and described more in terms of ways to communicate them, and thus according to Durkheim: “It is possible to define the rite only after we have defined the belief” (1976, p. 36). Within this model, whilst belief was seen to be of primary importance, ritual was understood to play a role in maintaining the status quo, with its fixed form and repetitious performance ensuring continuity and stability.

Although many subsequent theories have reinforced the idea that repetition is one of the defining characteristics of ritual, Stanley Tambiah (1985) does not follow Durkheim’s suggestion that ritual is secondary to belief. Instead, Tambiah emphasises the way in which the performance of a ritual can both express and create meaning, arguing:

when beliefs are taken to be prior to ritual action, the latter is considered as derivative and secondary, and is ignored or undervalued in its own right as a medium for transmitting meanings, constructing social reality, or, for that matter, creating and bringing to life the cosmological scheme itself (1985, p. 129).

Although Tambiah argues that rituals have a role in constructing belief however, he still maintains the concept that they help to maintain social stability. This is also the view of Roy Rappaport (1979), although his understanding of ritual also includes the state of mind of the participants:

He has, so to speak, signalled to himself that he has imposed a simple yes-no decision upon whatever ambivalence, fear and doubt he may have been experiencing. There is nothing for him to do now but to bring his private processes into accord with the new public status that follows from his ritual act (1979, p. 185).

So, although Rappaport goes further than the others in recognising a participant's state of mind and emotions, he clearly still sees ritual as a vehicle through which participants are brought together, and through the power of ritual, in spite of their own views or emotions, eventually conform to the status quo. This definition also suggests that a ritual is something that is prescribed, rather than created by the participants.

In relation to these definitions, of the different material that I have found which focuses specifically on a woman's rite of passage into motherhood, only the Rite of Churching, which I explore later in this chapter, can be understood as a ritual. Baby Showers and Mother Blessings which I also mention are, to the extent that they exist in the UK at the current time, usually done through choice.

Equally, although common characteristics exist for both events, Baby Showers and Mother Blessings tend to be by invitation only and created by the participants themselves. Thus, whilst a mother-to-be might feel obliged to conform to the views of others, or may experience pressure from some of the motherhood ideals that I have mentioned in the previous chapter, neither event is prescriptive.

Nor do many of the events that the women described to me during their interviews fit comfortably within any of the traditional definitions of ritual. Indeed, the women themselves were often uncomfortable with the word in relation to their own

experience. One woman I contacted replied by email saying: “I’m sure you can understand that given [my] particularly tragic circumstances of mothering, there has been neither ritual or meaning to the whole experience” (Personal correspondence, 17 August 2012). Twenty minutes later however, she wrote back saying:

as an afterthought, I suppose you could call a ritual my seeking out other stories of other mothers with parallel stories ... and my obsession with the Demeter-Persephone myth which embodies the pain of separation between mother and child ... I repeatedly write about the myth and write poems about.

In this email exchange the woman initially equates ritual with something that is meaningful and positive and not with her own experience which had been painful and chaotic. Her first response also reflects the order that is characteristic of the traditional definitions of ritual that I have outlined above.

Yet she goes on to describe the importance to her of listening to women with similar stories and exploring ancient myths, and then questions whether this too can be understood in terms of some form of ritual. Although the woman declined to be interviewed, I believe her responses in themselves are interesting because they encapsulate both a traditional understanding of what a ritual is, as well as the possibility that the term might also embrace other forms of activity.

This ambiguity is also reflected in another response from a woman whom I did go on to interview. Edna replied positively to my initial questionnaire which asked if anyone had experienced a ritual in relation to motherhood, recounting a story of an event that she had created for herself and yet in her interview she said: “I have so little experience of ritual. I would not have known how to start creating one of my own” (Interview, 19 November 2010). Although this later comment reflects a more traditional understanding, Edna’s positive response to my initial enquiry suggests that she was also open to the possibility that rituals can be understood in different ways.

Indeed, there are other definitions that provide a more helpful framework for exploring the activities of the women I interviewed. This is important precisely because many of the women did not comfortably recognise what they had done as a ritual. In fact, some of the women had never mentioned what they had done to anyone else and often tried to dismiss it as something trivial, even when it had been significant for them.

After I had sent one woman the transcript of her interview, for example, she wrote back saying: "I'm glad you appreciated my contribution, it didn't seem like much" (Personal correspondence, 23 February 2010). Thus, although the word ritual was sometimes a stumbling block, and possibly prevented some women from recognising that their experience was relevant to my research and coming forward, I also know that the importance of recognising and naming women's experience has been well documented by feminists (Christ & Plaskow, 1992, p. 7).

I am also conscious of the fact that the empowerment of women is considered to be an important principle that helps to characterize a piece of research as feminist (Slee, 2004). So although many of the women themselves may not have recognised what they did in terms of a ritual, by categorizing their actions in this way, I hope in some small way to both recognise and validate their actions.

With this in mind, the understanding of ritual that I have chosen to use in relation to my research, is primarily based on the work of Catherine Bell. She critiques the duality at the centre of Durkheim's definition between belief and ritual or thought and action, and argues that it fails to take ritual seriously as a practice on its own terms. Although Tambiah and Rappaport try to overcome this by including the roles of participants and observers, Bell advocates a different model, which may include but does not rely upon "formality, fixity and repetition" (1992, pp. 91-2) to become a ritual. She explains:

I will use the term ritualization to draw attention to the way in which certain social activities strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions. In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting

that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities (p. 74).

Thus, within Bell's definition the formal Rite of Churching and an informal gathering of women to help to prepare and honour a woman before childbirth whether it be with a Baby Shower or Mother Blessing, are all examples of ritual practice. Bell goes on to argue that the significance of ritual behaviour lies not in it being understood as "an entirely separate way of acting, but in how such activities constitute themselves as different and in contrast to other activities" (p. 90).

Understood in this way as social practice, Bell highlights four features of human activity as a basis for what she terms, ritualization. First, she explains that all human activity is situational, and thus can only be understood relative to its context. Secondly, she suggests that practice in relation to ritual is strategic, in that it is not action for its own sake but is designed to achieve a particular aim. Thirdly, she cites misrecognition as a feature, arguing that ritual participants attribute their activities to a divine or transcendent power rather than recognising them as a product of their own making. Lastly, Bell suggests that ritualizing reflects the social and power relationships that exist within their context, either by way of reinforcing or resisting them.

Indeed, Bell's understanding of ritualization provides a useful framework in relation to the other material I have found, particularly in relating to the activities of the women I interviewed because she describes occasions that are more closely associated with normal human activity than anything that is formal, fixed or repetitious.

The ritualizing of the women I interviewed was also strongly contextual, in that they did things in response to their own situation, experience and feelings. It was also often strategic and as a result sometimes referred to by the participants themselves as coping strategies. In other words, they were activities designed to reflect and to some extent help the women to deal with and reflect upon their emotions about a particular situation.

Bell's framework was also used by Berry to describe a wide range of women's ritual activity, which all reflected these first two features. However, in relation to Bell's concept of misrecognition, Berry argues that the very act of creating and enacting a ritual of your own "suggests a conscious intention and agency" (2009, p. 125).

I also believe that Bell's use of the word misrecognition is unhelpful because it implies a naïvety on the part of the participants which is misleading. What I think Bell is implying and what I recognise from within the rituals of my own research is that although the participants were fully aware of their own activity, the power of their ritualizing sometimes had the potential to reveal the unexpected or give experience to something that otherwise lay beyond their control.

Lastly, in reference to Bell's framework, the women I interviewed described events that often resisted the power dynamics within their own context. Sometimes this was done implicitly and at other times overtly, but in many ways the simple act of a woman ritualizing her thoughts and feelings during her journey into motherhood within a culture whose primary focus has traditionally been on the baby rather than the mother can be seen as an act of resistance rather than a reinforcement of the norm.

The word ritualizing has also been used by a number of other researchers and practitioners within the growing discipline of ritual studies. Among them, Ronald Grimes (2000) uses ritualizing as a "fuzzy term" to encompass the "unformed, shapeless stuff out of which rites [the hard version] emerge" (2000, p. 28). He makes a distinction between the two in an attempt to avoid the danger of suggesting that all human activity can be understood as ritual.

The fuzzy nature of ritualizing he suggests means that such events do not tend to attract broad social support because they are seen as too "dangerously creative, and insufficiently traditional" (2000, p. 29). He goes on to explain that whilst rites depend on institutions and traditions, in a western context, ritualizing tends to appeal to intuition and the imagination. This distinction is helpful for my own

research because it reflects the nature of some of the events the women described to me and also resonates with their reluctance to recognise their actions as rituals.

Based on Grimes' distinction, from this point onwards I will use rites and rituals to refer to published or institutionally sanctioned liturgies, such as the Rite of Churching, and his definition of ritualizing to encompass the more informal, creative events that the women described to me, such as Mother Blessings. However, I take Berry's point that the word itself, though widely used (Grimes, 2000; Bell C. , 1992; Northup, 1997) is a "clumsy term" (2009, p. 127). Based on the spirit of the way in which many of these activities were created by the women I interviewed, I have chosen to refer to this category as homemade rituals because as a term it reflects the time, thoughtfulness and creativity the women invested in them.

In addition, there is a third category of material within my research data which does not easily fit within either definition. They cannot be described as events, but are rather special moments that were mentioned by the women in the course of the interviews. By describing ritual in general terms as "*sequences of ordinary action rendered special by virtue of their condensation, elevation or stylization* [authors italics]" (2000, pp. 70-1), Grimes also opens up the possibility of including this third category too. In putting his emphasis on the intentions of the participants rather than on the form of ritual itself, Grimes makes room for less formalized or differentiated actions which he calls "ritualized gestures" (2000, p. 42) without suggesting that ritual is an all-encompassing term.

Within my research data, the homemade rituals that the women described, often appear within a sequence similar to Grimes' ritualized gestures. In other words, they were moments that were not always formalized or differentiated from their normal activity, but *were* intentional. At first this came as a surprise to me, as I had originally set out with the hope of finding singular events, but as this excerpt from my journal illustrates I slowly began to realise during the course of the interviews that what was being described to me was often very different:

Ruth's birthing stories were not told as separate events, but as a continuous thread, interwoven with other events in her life, the books she had read and images that she cherished ... Although Ruth's story doesn't really fit into my understanding of ritual, her experience is peppered with readings and stories, visualisations and significant moments which all feel to me to be relevant (Journal entry, 15 May 2010).

In fact, Ruth's interview was one of the first I conducted and since then over half of the women described similar patterns of ritualized activity, as in this example:

at that point (after five miscarriages) I just needed a huge amount of healing and kind of help ... I went regularly for massage ... and I named those children. We had another service after the ectopic in the hospital ... where we just remembered all of them ... I went for healing prayer and a whole load of things (Interview, 6 March 2012).

By adopting Grimes' concept of "ritualized gestures" I have been able to include a range of activities that the women described as helpful to them during their transition into motherhood. I then found it useful to think about these ritualized gestures in terms of ritual *sequences* because, rather than random actions, they were all connected by a particular theme or need. As in the example above, going for massages, naming her children and seeking out opportunities for prayer are all clearly linked to Miranda's need to find some form of healing and peace.

Within the category of ritual sequences I have therefore gone on to differentiate between 'marked' and 'remembered' moments. Ali, for example, talked about buying fabric, drawing a tree and using bunting from her wedding to decorate the birthing space as part of her preparation for childbirth. None of these actions on their own are particularly significant. However, if they are understood as 'remembered moments' in a ritualised sequence of activity, they each play an important part in creating a picture of how Ali used ritual to prepare herself for the birth of her child.

Ali also talked about marking particular moments. In another example, she mentioned being worried about having to get back into the normal family routine

after birth, before she felt ready and knew that she had physically healed. She explained,

on the Thursday night, in the middle of the night, I went into the kitchen. I got my elderflower. My vitamin C ... and I took down all the birth stuff⁹ and I saw it very much as a welcoming [of] life now. We've done birth. We haven't had long in birth mode but we've got to really get on with it now. Life mode now! (Interview, 6 March 2012)

I have chosen to use excerpts from Ali's experience at this point for clarity, but this example, like those of other women that I will introduce in the next chapter, are illustrations of the way in which the women's stories were peppered with 'marked moments' as well as 'remembered moments' as part of ritual sequences of activity.

Although the concept of ritual sequences was initially a surprise to me, upon reflection, it echoes a much wider pattern that can be seen within other forms of feminist ritualizing and spirituality (Berry, 2009; Northup, 1997). In her introduction to a book of essays entitled *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience*, Elizabeth Dodson Gray describes the male naming in patriarchal religion of the sacred as being responsible for creating a "strange landscape" (1988, p. 2), in which it is believed that it is necessary to distance and withdraw oneself from the realities of life in order to find the sacred.

Instead she introduces a new naming, based on women's experience in which the sacred can be encountered within ordinary, everyday human experience. It therefore follows that rather than needing to withdraw to a holy place, wait for an ordained person or use a prescribed liturgy, transition times can become peppered with marked and remembered moments which are performed by an individual or acquaintance, and that these combined moments form a ritual sequence of activity.

Having established my working definitions of ritual, homemade rituals and ritual sequences, I now want to highlight five important characteristics associated with

⁹ The wedding bunting, fabric and other artefacts.

ritual that also appear within the events and moments that the women described. These five characteristics not only help to support my argument that the women's actions belong within the field of ritual studies, but also help to identify them within the categories of contemporary ritual or feminist ritual, or both.

5.2.2 Five Important Characteristics Associated with Ritual

The first characteristic I want to identify is that of justice, which Driver (2006) mentions as a key function of contemporary ritual. He argues that ritual needs both a confessional mode, through which stories and experiences are shared and an ethical mode, which looks beyond itself. The telling of stories and the expression of emotion was indeed a strong theme within the women's accounts. Jackie for example asked the women at her Mother Blessing to share with her the greatest and hardest parts of being a mother and then shared some of her own fears about her impending transition.

Given the social issues around mothering that I outlined in the previous chapter and the relative invisibility of a woman's journey into motherhood, I would also argue that the very existence of moments of recognition are implicit acts of resistance, and therefore to do with justice. The importance of the kind of safe space that can be created within rituals to reimagine motherhood also potentially has important implications, not only for the women immediately involved in the event, but for those further afield, in changing attitudes and expectations.

This overlaps with the second important function of ritual that I want to mention which has been particularly highlighted by the work of feminists such as Berger (2001), which is the role ritual can play in the creation of new theo/alogy based on women's experience. Berger writes: "women today have rendered visible the liturgy as a crucial site for what, arguably it has always been: the negotiation between faith and women's lives" (2001, p. 73).

It would be misleading for me to suggest that all of the women I interviewed would be comfortable with Berger's Christian standpoint, because some of my research

participants clearly talked about having consciously chosen to leave the church. However, there was also a very strong sense within each of the interviews, albeit expressed in a variety of different ways, that there was something “magical” (Interview, 25 May 2007) or “spiritual” (Interview, 17 August 2009) about the women’s experience of birthing and/or their journey into motherhood.

I therefore want to draw on Berger’s observation to make the point that the homemade rituals and ritual sequences that the women created were important spaces through which it is possible to see their varying forms of spirituality develop and find expression, a point I will return to in chapter 7.

The third characteristic of the women’s ritualizing I want to highlight is their use of symbols. The role of symbolism is recognised across the spectrum of literature as having an important role to play in ritual. With reference to traditional definitions, Clifford Geertz (1993) suggested that within a religious system, symbols act as a powerful form of communication and have the effect within the enactment of a ritual of not only giving order and shape to the world but also reinforcing the authority of religious belief.

Within feminist ritualizing, symbols also act as powerful forms of communication, although they are not always part of a religious system. Indeed, sometimes they are used to re envisage the future, rather than reinforce the status quo, as Ruether suggests: “One needs not only to engage in rational theoretical discourse about this journey; one also needs deep symbols and symbolic actions to guide and interpret the actual experience of the journey” (1985, p. 3).

In fact, none of the symbols used by the women I interviewed were specifically Christian but instead were drawn from their daily lives and the world around them. Flowers, water, candles, beads and scarves were used for example, whilst Maria talked about the powerful symbolism of a butterfly and eggs to represent the idea of transformation. This resonates with the findings of other researchers into women’s rituals (Berry, 2009; Northup, 1997) who have noted the way in which

“the endless host of women’s unglorified daily activities are being mined by women seeking a distinctive spiritual expression” (Northup, 1997, p. 33).

Linked to this is the women’s use of embodied action which is the fourth characteristic that I want to introduce. Although rituals usually comprise words and actions, such as the exchanging of vows and rings at a wedding, they are usually performed according to a set text or formula. The women’s ritualizing included some actions we would associate with more traditional rituals such as eating, washing and singing although there was no set formula. However, dancing and sweeping were also mentioned.

These latter embodied actions again resonate with feminist rituals in their creativity and spontaneity (Berry, 2009; Northup, 1997) but not with more traditional rites, particularly from a Western, Christian context. Another difference was that by their very nature, some of the women’s ritualizing focused positively on bodily themes such as pregnancy, birthing and breastfeeding.

The fifth and final feature that I want to highlight from the field of ritual studies, is the importance of ritual criticism (Northup, 1993). Just as Grimes critiques the inadequacy of some traditional rites for example, Tom Driver warns that “ritual boredom” (2006, p. 7) is widespread within contemporary Western society and the church. The issue of ritual criticism is an interesting one in relation to my own research because I feel that it would be inappropriate for me to critique any of the homemade rituals or marked or remembered moments that the women described to me. Mainly because they themselves rarely described their activities as rituals and because most were not intended to become public.

However, there were examples from within my research data of the women themselves critiquing their rituals. Reflecting on her experience of leading both of the events that she invited people to during her pregnancy, Monica said: “I just sort of led it. I would never think that that was a good idea again ... [but] I didn’t know who to ask” (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Another example arose from Jackie's interview in which she was describing the tensions she felt at the time about undergoing a symbolic journey that she and a friend had set up as part of her Mother Blessing:

I felt incredibly nervous about it [the journey element of the ritual] so I don't think that I would necessarily recommend that anyone else did this and now I think it feels quite odd that we did this, but ... it had a lot of significance at the time (Interview, 20 March 2012).

So although from an ethical point of view I feel that criticising the women's rituals would undermine the delicate balance of trust that was so important for me to build with my research participants, a number of the women offered critiques of their own work, based on their experience.

In conclusion, although colloquially and academically the word ritual has a range of meanings, and the women themselves did not often use the word directly in relation to their own activities I have chosen to refer to the women's stories in terms of homemade rituals and ritual sequences. In doing so I have drawn from a range of literature within the field of ritual theory which recognizes ritual activity as being intentional actions relating to normal human activity.

I have also highlighted five important characteristics from the field of ritual studies that further help to identify the women's actions within this genre. I have argued that the women's ritualizing created spaces for their spirituality to develop and be expressed and that the very act of holding such events can be seen as implicit acts of resistance and therefore implicitly to do with justice. I have described the nature of some of the symbols used by the women and mentioned the role that embodied actions played within their ritualizing. Lastly, I have highlighted the importance of ritual criticism and given examples of the women critiquing their own ritualizing.

Having identified strong points of connection between the women's ritualizing and the field of ritual studies, in the next section I want to establish a historical context for their homemade rituals and ritual sequences. I begin this next section with a personal reflection on my perception at the time of my own birthing, before moving

on to explain reasons for this. I then create an overview of current related resources before finally exploring the motherhood rituals that I have found.

5.3 The Historical Context

5.3.1 A Personal Reflection

Most of the important occasions in my life have been marked by an event, such as my graduation or ordination. Even the lesser milestones such as birthdays or anniversaries have been celebrated in the normal, more informal way, with cards, presents and cakes. Yet as I approached the prospect and later the reality of becoming a mother I was not aware of any rituals, other than baptism, that were associated with this particular life stage. I had heard about people having a Baby Shower, but at the time I associated these with people leaving work to go on maternity leave, and because I was not in employment at the time, it didn't seem particularly relevant.

Although I have never been a very consistent journal writer, I have often kept a record of significant holidays, particularly when I have travelled abroad, and so when I first became pregnant I bought a new note book with large blank pages to record my journey. I regret not continuing with it now, but the child of my first pregnancy did not survive beyond the twelve week scan, and I couldn't bring myself to start another journal when I became pregnant again.

Another significant moment that I wanted to mark was that of the twins' birth. I had read somewhere of the tradition of whispering the name for God into the ear of a new born baby. I wanted to make that moment special and my plan was to whisper the words 'Yahweh' and 'love' into their ears and to welcome them to the world, but the drugs, the atmosphere of the theatre and the medical procedures made it difficult to create the kind of welcome I had imagined.

Something else that I remember being particularly significant to me at the time was humming the tune to ‘Amazing Grace’¹⁰ when we were struggling to breastfeed in the hospital. It had been one of my father-in-law’s favourite hymns, my husband had played it at our wedding, and the history of the hymn itself holds such weight and gravitas that it seemed to express and reflect some of what I was feeling inside. It was a hymn that spoke to me of struggle but also linked me, in the loneliness of the hospital room, to other people.

I also remember watching the snow falling outside of the hospital window and showing it to the twins. At the time it represented a life beyond my present reality that I longed to get back to, but I also recall feeling rather lost. I felt to be in the midst of one of the most significant phases of my life, and theirs, but I didn’t know how to mark it. Anything I did seemed trivial and yet because of its timing hugely significant.

In addition, I was confused between what I felt I needed to do for myself and what I should do for them. I felt selfish even thinking about it and when I asked a minister, whose views I had long respected, he just encouraged me to sort myself out, so that we could get on with planning the children’s baptism.

In fact, there *are* resources available that focus on motherhood, although some had not been written at the time of my birthing experience, or I was not yet aware of them. Through this research I have also now become aware of fragments of women’s ritualizing associated with motherhood that stretches back through past generations. In the next section I attempt to explain some of the reasons why this wasn’t immediately apparent to me, and I would suggest, to many other women, before I go on to describe the traditions that I have found.

5.3.2 Reasons Why

Emerging out of a small conference on women’s health in rural Pennsylvania during the second wave of feminism in the United States, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre

¹⁰ John Newton (1725 – 1807)

English published a pamphlet entitled *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*. Now in its second edition (2010) their work charts the rise of the modern medical profession out of the suppression and persecution of a much older tradition of female lay healing.

The premise of their work was to highlight that the ignorance and disempowerment of women in relation to their own bodies at the time (the 1970s) had not always been the case, but was rather the result of a prolonged power struggle that had taken place well before the rise of scientific medicine, during which female lay healers had been frequently targeted as witches. In their introduction to the first publication Ehrenreich and English wrote:

Women have always been healers. They were the unlicensed doctors and anatomists of Western history ... They were midwives, travelling from home to home and village to village. For centuries women were doctors without degrees, barred from books and lectures, learning from each other, and passing on experience from neighbour to neighbour and mother to daughter. They were called "wise women" by the people, witches or charlatans by the authorities (2010, p. 25).

The work of piecing together the fragments of history that remain from the past has been continued by others such as Rich (1977) Daly (1978) and Frye (2010) which means that to some extent their legacy has not been forgotten. However, the fact that women of the past rarely wrote books also means that much of the knowledge and wisdom they accumulated is no longer known to us.

Another exception to this comes from the preservation of fragments of indigenous Celtic spirituality preserved through the work of a man called Alexander Carmichael (1992). His collection is not without its limitations and controversy which I will describe in more detail in the section below entitled 'Ritual Fragments'. Firstly however, I want to mention resources that have drawn on the foundations of second wave feminism, through which theologians and liturgists have sought to create new material weaving the reality of women's lives into their work. A review

of the literature now available in this genre is the focus of the next section of this chapter.

5.3.3 A Review of Current Resources

Since the foundational work of feminists in the 1970s, such as Rich (1977) and Daly (1978), a wide range of literature from fiction (Walker, 1983) to politics (Wolf, 1991) and sociology (Oakley, 1984) to theology (McFague, 1987) has increasingly brought the realities and differences between women's lives into view.

With regard to resources that are specifically Christian on the theme of motherhood, Hebblethwaite's *Motherhood and God* (1984) was the first book of its kind to encourage women to recognise God within their experience of motherhood, as well as to think about the motherhood of God. Hebblethwaite used her experience as the mother of three young children to talk about the realities of motherhood and used this as the basis for her theological explorations. In 1987, Sallie McFague also published a now classic text, *Models of God* in which she challenged the traditional ways in which Christians have tended to talk about God and introduced three other metaphors, including that of mother.

In the 1990s a wide range of experience-based theology along similar lines to these earlier publications was also produced. On the subject of motherhood, for example, a book on women's preaching contains sermons reflecting experiences of childbirth and being a mother (Walton & Durber, 1994). Similarly, *Celebrating Women* (Ward, Wild, & Morley, 1995) includes a poem by Kathy Galloway connecting a woman's labour with the Genesis story of creation (p. 10) and another by Janet Morley reflects a Eucharist shared by a group of women, in which she evokes the idea of sitting with Mary during her labour on the night of Christmas Eve (p. 107).

Alongside these publications, came an increasing number of resources that sought to address the gap between traditional Christian liturgy and pastoral need, particularly in relation to women (Graham, 1989). *Life Cycles* (Graham & Halsey, 1993) and *Human Rites* (Ward & Wild, 1995) for example, provide resources on a

wide range of pastoral issues that had previously been ignored by the church, such as abortion and sexual abuse.

However, in specific reference to rituals that have been created reflecting a woman's transition into motherhood very little still exists, as Thelma Aldcroft described in 1993:

a ritual in which a woman was able to relive and reclaim the process of actually giving birth does not appear to exist, even in places where it claimed to do so! Feminist life-cycle rituals jump from antenatal rituals to rituals surrounding the baby (p. 187).

Of the two sources within the Christian tradition that I am aware of, both reflect this same scenario. Rosemary Radford-Ruether (1985) includes issues relating to abortion, miscarriage and stillbirth alongside her 'Birthing Preparation Liturgy' (p. 200). Diann Neu (2003) also touches on issues around abortion and a lost pregnancy in addition to rituals designed to support women in the reproductive choices they make, before incorporating a 'Blessing [for] a Mother-to-be' (p. 224). In other words, both sources extend the liturgical literature available to women on the subject of motherhood, but neither deals with any issues beyond pregnancy.

Aside from specifically Christian liturgies, a similar pattern can also initially be seen. In a book written and published in the US in 1997 for example a range of rituals to celebrate different aspects of women's lives includes 'A Celebration for Women Becoming Mothers' (McCarthy, Mitrano, Muschal-Reinhardt, & Grinnan, p. 57) but does not offer any rituals for women on any other aspect of their transition into motherhood.

More recently however, an American publication compiled by Lynn Caruso called *Honoring Motherhood* (2008) offers a wide range of prayers, poetry and ceremonies from different faith traditions for each phase of a woman's transition into motherhood and beyond, and acknowledges the many different routes through which women become mothers.

Similarly, in her book entitled *Birthrites* (2009) Jackie Singer, who kindly agreed to be interviewed for this piece of research, has brought together resources for parents on a spectrum of issues from infertility to termination. Alongside real life stories, Singer encourages her readers to create their own rituals and provides guidelines on how to do so. Reflecting her own spirituality, her suggestions are also drawn from a broad range of sources. In reference to the sections of her book which cover a woman's journey into motherhood, she includes ideas and stories from other cultural traditions as well as visualisation techniques, meditations and a Gaelic prayer. She also includes three Mother Blessings, one of which is her own, that I will go on to explore in the following chapter.

In summary, whilst there are now a number of resources within the church which speak to a range of women's needs and experiences and there is also material drawing from a mixture of cultural and faith traditions, there are no contemporary Christian liturgical resources that are focused on any aspect of a woman's transition into motherhood, beyond pregnancy. Although I have not restricted my search for material to Christian resources and explore the customs of Baby Showers and Mother Blessings in the next section of this chapter, neither of which necessarily have any relationship to a belief system, I have been careful not to borrow resources from other faiths or cultures for a number of reasons.¹¹

My intention through this thesis is to make a further contribution to the work of Christian feminist theologians by adding to the resources available to women during their transition into motherhood, including and beyond pregnancy. In doing so I am mindful of the work of other women I have met during the course of this journey whose research also focuses on motherhood in related areas.

Among them is Emma Percy (2014) who has recently published a book based on her doctoral thesis exploring similarities between motherhood and priesthood. Allison Fenton, whose work I have already referred to, has looked at the role that a child's

¹¹ Having previously explained that I did not wish to produce a comparative study in chapter 3, I also explore the ethics of borrowing from other cultures and faith traditions in the section below on Mother Blessings.

baptism plays in the lives of women in the North East of England, and has explored childbirth as an encounter with God (Personal communication, 27 April 2015).

Noelia Molina has looked at the spiritual experiences of first-time mothers (2013) and Helen Collins has sought to critique charismatic worship practices from the perspective of early motherhood (Journal entry, 9 November 2013).

In the final phase of this chapter I complete my overview of resources by exploring four different strands of motherhood rituals that I have discovered from the past or are emerging at the present time within my own culture. I begin by looking at the Churching of Women from the Christian tradition and some of its related customs whose strict protocols would, in the past, have directed a woman's journey through her first weeks after birth. I then go on to explore the relatively recent phenomenon of Baby Showers and Mother Blessings.

Finally, I describe some fragments of ritual tradition that I have discovered within Celtic Spirituality that would have been associated with a wide range of the different phases of a woman's transition into motherhood, particularly labour. In my outline of the ritual activities below I have tried to highlight common threads between them and the events that the women described to me in their interviews. I have also sought to draw out themes that might serve as inspiration for future ritualizing.

5.3.4 Motherhood Rituals Past and Present

5.3.4.1 The Churching of Women

The Christian liturgical tradition no longer has a ceremony that specifically focuses on a woman and her experience of childbirth¹² but this has not always been the case. The medieval church had blessing ceremonies for three different occasions: a blessing for the mother before birth, after birth and a reintroduction of the mother

¹² The authors of the *Alternative Service Book*, published by the Anglican Church in 1980, decided not to include churching, and although there have been instances recorded of requests for it since then (Staton, 1980), partly due to the imposition of the clergy and the passage of time, the rite is now widely regarded as obsolete.

back into social and religious life (Knödel, 1997, p. 108). The prayers for before and after childbirth were often not specifically written for the situation, but adapted from either the marriage ceremony or prayers for the sick (Franz, 1909, pp. 189 - 212).

However, the ceremony that reintroduced a woman back into society after childbirth had a specific liturgy, known as 'The Churching of Women' or the 'Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth', commonly known as churching.

The concept that a woman should be separate from society for a while after childbirth is not a specifically Christian idea, and although traditions vary, rites to mark her reintroduction into society can be found in a variety of cultures (Vincent-Priya, 1992). The biblical background for a Christian practice of the custom is derived from the story of Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 2: 22-38), who followed the Jewish custom of visiting the temple as described in Leviticus 12: 1-8.

In spite of this biblical precedent however, it is difficult to confirm when the liturgy first became established within the western church, or to know what other customs preceded it, but surviving manuscripts suggest that from the eleventh century onwards (Coster, 1990, p. 377) a rite existed and continued to be practiced here in the UK until the late 1960s, when it began to die out rapidly, (Houlbrooke, 2011). Before I explore the rite itself however, I want to highlight some of the difficulties associated with researching it.

The first point I want to make is that there is always a difference between a liturgical text and the performance of a liturgy, just as there can be disparity between the understanding of the person administering a ceremony, and the one receiving it. In the context of researching the Rite of Churching, these issues are compounded by a number of factors.

Firstly, in terms of historical resources, whilst a number of liturgical texts exist, very few sources depict churching in practice, and those that do are rarely described from the point of view of the women involved. With such fragmentary evidence

available Cressy warns that it is difficult not to “draw evidence eclectically from different periods, as if all issues and problems were at all times equally present” (1993, p. 111).

The lack of evidence from women themselves can also lead to an over reliance on historical changes to the liturgical text. Changes to the liturgy in 1552 for example altered the emphasis of the text from purification to thanksgiving, but it would be misleading to deduce that society’s understanding of the rite altered accordingly.

Long before the Rite of Churching was introduced by the church for example, superstitions surrounding childbirth and motherhood existed within society, and thereafter became intricately bound together with the official liturgy of the church. Indeed, Thomas suggests that the ceremony took on a semi-magical significance in popular estimation in relation to these beliefs, and thus argues that any changes by the hierarchy of the church to the liturgical text was unlikely to have made much of an impression on society’s understanding of the rite’s purpose or significance (1971, p. 39).

Equally, for much of its history, the ceremony was performed in Latin, which many of the women would not have understood. That is not to suggest that the ceremony would have been meaningless to them, but rather that their interpretation of the occasion would often not have centred on the text.

Another important fact to remember with regard to researching the Rite of Churching is to recognise that the ceremony is no longer practised, so it was impossible for me to experience it for myself either as a researcher or as a participant. Furthermore, although I have spoken to some women who have been ‘churched’, it would be misleading to transpose their views onto those of previous generations.

This is particularly pertinent to the Rite of Churching because of its long association with the issue of purification. Whilst for some contemporary women the rite evokes painful memories and anger, it is possible that this was not always the case for

women of previous generations, who may have benefited from the custom in other ways.

Indeed, while being mindful of the rite's legacy, my main interest in relation to this piece of research is to find out whether any aspects of the tradition could have served to facilitate and support a woman through her rite of passage into motherhood at the time. I am also interested to see whether there is a relationship between the loss of the ritual and any of the issues mentioned by the women I interviewed in respect of their experience of childbirth. Lastly, I am keen to discover whether there are any resonances between the old ritual and some of the women's ritualizing that I came across.

That is not to ignore the very real and damaging influence the issue of purification has had, but to recognise that as with any feminist attempt to reclaim parts of the Christian tradition, it is only possible to recover fragments, which are by their very nature ambiguous because of their entanglement with patriarchy. From my own exploration of the rite I want to highlight two of the customs related to the tradition of churching, and then go on to focus on the liturgy itself.

The first custom I want to mention, was popularly referred to as 'lying in' which was the period of time that the ceremony of churching officially brought to a close. Although there were many superstitions associated with this tradition (Coster, 1990, p. 380) and particularly strong associations with the concept of impurity (Roll, 2003, p. 134), the fact that there was an expectation that women needed time to recuperate after birth is worth highlighting.

One example of this mixture of superstition and practicality occurred during the 1600s when it was believed there was a possibility that new born babies could be substituted for a fairy child, and that the risk was most acute before the child had been baptised or the mother churched. Whilst research suggests there was a very real risk of baby snatching in some areas of the country at this time, it is also the case that the myth would have highlighted the practical need for a mother and baby

to spend time together during the early weeks after the birth, to heal, bond and establish breastfeeding (Thomas, 1971, p. 612).

Popular tradition also meant that a woman was not allowed to resume her normal role until she had been churched. These duties were in some instances understood to include household chores, but also sexual intercourse and the resumption of manual labour (Cressy, 1993, pp. 115-16). Although it is impossible to be clear how strictly these customs were adhered to, the Rite of Churching acted in theory at least as a form of protection for women. Indeed, von Arx suggests that in some cases the ceremony was postponed by the church, to give a woman more time to recuperate (1979, p. 70).

Over recent decades, and probably linked with the end of the Rite of Churching, the recognition within western culture that a woman needs time to recuperate after childbirth has declined, with various high profile celebrities reportedly returning to 'normal' within a few days.¹³ Although the introduction of statutory maternity leave enables women to take time off paid work to care for their baby, there is no longer a custom or even the expectation in most circles that women need time apart, immediately after childbirth to heal, adapt and bond (Wray, 2011).

Although it is not easy to discern whether women appreciated or resented 'lying in', it is clear that they and their baby would have benefitted physically and possibly also emotionally from it. Even though the risks of infant and maternal death are not as high as they once were, the importance of taking time to adapt to the changes that have taken place was instrumental for two of my research participants, Ruth and Ali, deciding to create lying in periods for themselves and the special nature of this time was also a feature in a number of the women's stories.

The second custom that I want to highlight that was related to churching and seems to have been popular amongst women at various times in history was that of 'the

¹³ Among them, it was well publicised in January 2012, that Amanda Holden returned to work only days after almost losing her life in childbirth. Karren Brady, at one time considered one of the country's most successful business women was also reported to only have taken a 3 day maternity leave before returning to work.

gossiping'. This occurred after the official ceremony, much in the way that nowadays baptisms, weddings and funerals are often followed by a social event. The scale of the festivities varied, but Cressy suggests that their popularity is evident within a variety of sources (1993, p. 113), including sermons when one minister warned against the "wanton behaviour, and unseasonable mirth, which often doth accompany such meetings" (Hill, 1610, p. 412).

My interest in this custom, is that although men were sometimes invited to the gossiping, it was principally a female occasion during which the new mother was supported and encouraged by other women who would have celebrated with her, as well as no doubt sharing their own stories and experiences. So, even though Cressy suggests that gossipings were simply "opportunities for hospitality, conviviality and display" (1993, p. 112), I would argue that they may also have acted on a deeper level, as a celebration of a woman's transition into motherhood, amongst women who would have understood what she had gone through, either because they had attended the birth, from their own experience, or both.

In connection to this point it is also interesting to note that the same women who had accompanied the mother through her labour, would also have been at her churching, and that the gossiping included the midwife (Cressy, 1993, p. 114). Indeed, these women would have been drawn from the local community and would usually have included some of the woman's female relatives.

In other words, throughout her transition into motherhood a woman would have been accompanied by a group of women who knew her. Although I can imagine that this was often difficult in terms of family dynamics and community politics, the continuity of care that this custom would have provided is something that was often mentioned as lacking by the women I interviewed.

The ways in which the women I spoke to sought to address their concerns regarding support, particularly from women, is also a feature of some of their ritualizing, particularly in relation to the use of birthing partners, the employment of doulas and the social nature of the events that were held during pregnancy.

Having looked at some of the customs associated with churhing, I now want to turn my attention to the liturgy itself. With regards to the text, I am purposefully not attempting to imagine what women throughout the lifetime of the rite might have understood from the liturgy. Rather I am looking at the text from the viewpoint of my own context and experience and want to highlight three themes, which to my mind have the potential to be empowering. In doing so I am mindful of the work of others who have sought to reconsider the rite for similar reasons, including Natalie Knödel (1997) who later also published under the name of Watson (2002), Elizabeth Hassell (2009) and Allison Fenton (2012).

The first theme I want to highlight is that of thanksgiving. By 1662, having gone through a number of revisions, the ceremony appeared in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as ‘The Thanksgiving of Women after Child-birth’. In other words, whilst the rite still held connotations for many with the concept of purification, the title of the liturgy clearly focused on the theme of thanksgiving.

In fact the theme runs throughout the liturgy, beginning with the rubric that the new mother should “kneel down in some convenient place” during which the following words were read by the priest: “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his goodness to give you safe deliverance, and hath preserved you in the great danger of Child-birth: you shall therefore give hearty thanks unto God”, and concluded with a prayer beginning with the words: “O Almighty God, we give thee humble thanks for that thou hast vouchsafed to deliver this woman thy servant from the great pain and Child-birth”.¹⁴

Although from a personal perspective I am uncomfortable with this understanding of God and the idea that the woman kneels and remains silent whilst the words of thanksgiving are spoken by the priest who remains standing. I also want to acknowledge that the opportunity to give thanks and the recognition of my own

¹⁴ All excerpts were retrieved from (The Churching of Women, The Book of Common Prayer, 1662).

humility in the face of such a great mystery as childbirth is congruent with my understanding and feelings at the time.

Although some contemporary naming ceremonies include the theme of thanksgiving, the focus of a traditional baptismal service is unsurprisingly on baptism and the child. The 1662 text for the Rite of Churching however places thanksgiving in its title, and focuses on the mother and thus implicitly places thanksgiving at the heart of a mother's response. Indeed, thanksgiving was a strong theme throughout many of my interviews, and became a feature of some of the homemade rituals or marked moments created by the women after the birth.

The second theme that I want to highlight from within the liturgical text is that of recognition. As I have mentioned in the prologue, one of the reasons that I started this research was because I felt an uncomfortable tension during visits I made before a Baptism or Naming Ceremony, between what I was told privately, and the nature of the ceremony I was being asked to conduct in public.

Both in terms of the women I met, and in relation to my own experience, what I began to sense was that a woman's transition into motherhood was an important transition, and one that was worthy and indeed important to recognise. I also realised that although in many ways a mother and baby's lives and stories are strongly interlinked at this stage, they are also importantly separate.

In the Rite of Churching, the ceremony was held on a separate occasion to the child's baptism, and its focus was entirely on the mother, rather than on both of the parents or the child. The fact that the rite took place in church, where other important rites of passage were marked and religious ceremonies took place, may also have reinforced a woman's perception that her experience was significant, not only for her but also for the wider community.

I would also argue that the theme of recognition was further supported by the use of the psalms. Within the 1662 liturgy it was suggested that Psalm 116 or an equivalent should be used, which includes the words: "The snares of death

compassed me round about: and the pains of hell gat hold of me ... thou hast delivered my soul from death: mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling."

However, the use of the psalm in this way is controversial. In deciding not to include churching in the Alternative Service Book, the authors of the commentary explained their belief that; "The extravagant language of 1662 about 'the great pain and peril of childbirth' was becoming less appropriate" (Read, 2008). Similarly, in her research Elizabeth Hassall noted that some contemporary women who she had shown the liturgy to had reacted negatively to the same reference, commenting that it seemed "irrelevant" to their experience of childbirth (2009, p. 49).

Certainly it would be wrong to suggest that every woman's experience is the same and maternal mortality rates in the UK are indeed lower now than they have ever been in the past.¹⁵ However, it is also interesting to observe Hassall's note, that the women who reacted negatively to the use of the Psalm had more of a church connection than those who responded positively.

Although her sample was very small, her observation resonates with the work of other theologians who have highlighted the fact that the realities of human experience, particularly that of women, often do not find expression in public worship (Anderson & Foley, 2001, p. 5; Aldcroft, 1993, p. 51). In other words, the women who responded negatively to the inclusion of the psalm, may have been put off by the unexpected reality of the words within the context of a Christian liturgy, or may simply have had a better birthing experience.

Indeed, I would suggest that Hassall's observation highlights the importance of choice and of recognising that every birthing is unique, as previously mentioned. However, I would also add, that from my own experience I think that the use of the psalm in this context is very powerful. When I asked Charlotte to share some of her

¹⁵ Geoffrey Chamberlain writes that 'maternal mortality rates have been reduced in the last two centuries, particularly in the last 70 years' and cites a number of reasons for this, including better education, health and nutrition of mothers, better obstetric and midwifery practice and the introduction of antibiotics. (2006)

story at her children's baptism, I felt uncomfortable about asking her to share something so private in public, at what was already a very vulnerable time for her.

In this instance, the concept of a psalm being used to recognise someone's experience, without them having to share their own story publicly, not only has the potential for them to feel validated but also possibly empowered. The psalm not only connects private experiences with public worship, but also a new mother's experience with the pain and fear of women across the world and down the centuries. The use of the psalm thus transforms a personal story into a shared narrative, and weaves a potentially inexpressible human experience into 'holy' scripture.

However, the women I interviewed also found alternative ways to navigate the difficult balance between private and public. Jemma for example chose to use the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) as a way of publicly sharing some of her own story, whilst poetry, art and journaling were other vehicles through which the women chose to express their story.

My last point with reference to the text refers to the prayer at the end of the rite, which reads: "Grant, we beseech thee, most merciful Father, that she, through thy help, may both faithfully live, and walk according to thy will, in this life present". With these words, and having mentioned the ordeal of childbirth, the rite turns its attention towards the woman's future. Although this is very much my own modern day interpretation, the wording implies that the woman is first a person who is charged with living faithfully, in the many roles that she may fulfil, which now also includes motherhood.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the concept that the birth of a child also involves an important life transition for the mother is often ignored within my own culture at the present time. This became a stark realisation for me after childbirth and for a number of the women, including Ruth who said:

We had a great big baptism ... but there was nothing in it for me ... I felt as though I'd been stripped of my old role and was in the middle of building a new life, but there was nothing in it that connected with my experience (Interview, 10 May 2010).

Indeed, the creation of spaces where the women could reflect on their impending new role was an important feature within the antenatal rituals that they described. The concept that the women recognised motherhood as an evolving role was also evident from the part it played as a feature of a number of the post birth rituals too.

Although the Rite of Churching is the only liturgy within the Christian tradition that focuses on a woman and her experience of childbirth, I do not believe that the ceremony should be reintroduced. In spite of the great effort and strides forward that have taken place, girls of the next generation are still not free from the damaging effects of patriarchal concepts such as female impurity and inferiority.

By looking at the rite and its related customs from my own experience and that of the women I have interviewed however, I have been able to recognise more clearly some of the gaps within our experiences of childbirth and transition into motherhood that in previous generations might have been more easily dealt with through the tradition of churching, such as the custom of lying in and the continuation of support. I have also found overlaps between the liturgical text and traditions associated with churching and the ritualizing of the women I interviewed, particularly the opportunity for thanksgiving, the recognition of a woman's transition and the use of the psalms.

5.3.4.2 Baby Showers

A Baby Shower, and its lesser known equivalent, a Mother Blessing are both examples of secular ritualizing and are designed to focus on a woman during her pregnancy. The term "Baby Shower" emerged around the turn of the twentieth century in America as an exclusively female event. Its original purpose was for women in the local community to support a first time mother-to-be by providing

her with a modest collection of essential goods, and offering her advice on her impending role as a mother.

In December, 1908 the St John's Review felt compelled to explain the relatively new phenomena by clarifying that a Mrs W L Plummer was not the recipient of "a shower of babies" but a shower of presents by "a houseful of friends" who had gathered "to pay their respects".

Baby Showers became more popular in America after World War II, during the post-war baby boom and through the 1970s and 1980s became increasingly more commercialised. By the late 1980s a reporter for The New York Times introduced the phrase "Power Shower" reflecting the way in which Baby Showers were becoming more opulent, and used by some people as a way to demonstrate their wealth and social status (Alexander, 1988).

Although Baby Showers have become an established ritual within American society however (Davis-Floyd, 2003), this trend was comparatively uncommon in the UK until fairly recently. Prompted by the news that Pippa Middleton was hosting one for her sister the Duchess of Cambridge, Mothercare conducted a survey in 2013 suggesting that only 28 per cent of British mothers have had a Baby Shower (Usborne, 2013).

However, although the popularity of holding a Baby Shower in the UK may well be set to rise, none of the women I interviewed referred to Baby Showers, and when they did mention having a ritual before the birth of their baby, they described an event that had more in common with a Mother Blessing. It would be misleading however to see this viewpoint as representative, as the women were contacted through my own personal networks, although the reasons for their choice not to hold a Baby Shower are worth mentioning.

The first factor as I have already stated is a Baby Shower's close association with consumerism. The lavish gifts reportedly given by celebrities for events they don't

attend is perhaps the most blatant example of Baby Shower superficiality¹⁶, but it is also a risk for those on more modest incomes.

Fischer and Gainer highlight the important role that a Baby Shower can play in the formulation of a woman's new sense of identity, by "providing an opportunity for a woman to 'try out' both the new equipment she will need to care for her baby, as well as to 'try out' her role as a mother" (1993, p. 320). Their paper draws on research done in the late 1980s which "established the importance of consumption activities to the construction and maintenance of self and identity" (Schouten, 1991, p. 412).

Whilst a number of the women I interviewed mentioned struggling with their self-identity during this time, and may well have bought products that helped them through this transition, I would argue that their ritualizing, particularly in relation to their Mother Blessings, sought to tap into much deeper understandings of self, that in turn have a more transformative potential than any consumer products that are available.

A second characteristic of Baby Showers that may well have deterred the women I interviewed from holding one is the perception that they owe more to a frivolous hen party than to an empowering ritual. Indeed, in their research, Fischer and Gainer point out that "the centrality of child-like rituals" at a conventional Baby Shower can have a negative effect on a pregnant woman's self-esteem at a time when she is already on the verge of losing some of her independence (1993, p. 322).

It is customary, for example for the venue to be decorated with balloons and banners, and the food and games are equally reminiscent of a children's birthday party. The pregnant woman is also traditionally presented with a bonnet often made from a paper plate and festooned with ribbons and bows which she is expected to wear throughout the proceedings. In addition to the bonnet, a chair is

¹⁶ In June 2013, the American reality television personality Kim Kardashian threw a lavish Baby Shower which Beyoncé was reportedly unable to attend. Instead she sent a gift of a crystal-studded high chair worth around £9,000.

sometimes decorated and referred to as the ‘throne’, which the pregnant woman sits on to open her gifts. Fischer and Gainer go on to suggest that:

at the same time as a baby shower seems to mark the transition to full female adulthood/motherhood, it also seems to mark the return to the innocence and purity associated with childhood. Whilst the childish games and the beribboned bonnet infantilize the woman and seem to symbolize this return to innocence, the decorated throne may even more clearly represent a symbolic return to the virginal state associated with Mother Mary, Queen of the World (1993, p. 323).

So, although a Baby Shower can be a fun way to gather a community together and show support for the mother to be, there are a number of traditions affiliated to a conventional Baby Shower, most notably its association with consumerism and the childish nature of many of its activities that continue to put some women off.

Although as a ritual activity, a Baby Shower does focus on the mother and provide an opportunity for women to come together to show their support in a similar way to the custom of gossiping, it is possible that the nature of the event can in fact reinforce the traditional institution of motherhood rather than providing an opportunity for the empowerment and transformation for an individual to take place.

5.3.4.3 Mother Blessings

A Mother Blessing at one level shares many similarities with a Baby Shower; they are traditionally both held prior to birth and tend to be all female events, each involves food and gifts and are designed to gather a community of support around the mother to be. However, there are also some important differences.

The gifts at a Mother Blessing for example tend to be inexpensive, with a focus on their meaning rather than on their utilitarian or monetary value. Food is usually brought by the guests to share rather than being provided by the host, and instead of games, activities revolve around honouring the mother to be and offering her both emotional and spiritual support. The emphasis of a Mother Blessing therefore

tends to be on reciprocity rather than consumerism and empowerment in preference to advice.

The concept of a Mother Blessing seems to be increasing in popularity here in the UK in a similar way to Baby Showers, albeit on a much smaller scale, through middle class alternative circles such as doula and home birthing networks. In all, three of the ten women that I interviewed mentioned holding an event similar to a Mother Blessing, and two others said that they knew about them. However, they all used different names when they referred to such an event.

In direct relation to their own ritual Jackie described holding a 'Mother Blessing', Monica mentioned having both a 'Maternity Blessing' and a 'Labouring Ceremony' and Maria wrote in an email about "the ritual I did for the birth of Hannah when I was eight months pregnant" (Personal communication, 28 Jan 2012). Ali and Ruth also talked about similar rituals, and the more common name Blessingway was used, but was always qualified, and herein lies an issue.

In 2006, a book entitled *Mother Rising: The Blessingway Journey into Motherhood* was published, and although there is a range of material on the web, this was the first book of its kind to bring together resources. By using the word Blessingway, the authors were acknowledging that the name and roots for this style of ritual originates with the Navajo (Native American) people.

The name Blessingway is not an exact translation but is derived from a term in the Navajo language that encompasses everything that is good (Wyman, 1970). The intention of their traditional Blessingway ceremony was to ensure well-being at any stage of life, and was performed for expectant mothers shortly before the birth. The ceremony itself lasted for two nights and included a ritual bath, special food and the Blessingway chant which is the most complete account of the Navajo origin myth chronicling the birth and puberty of Changing Woman, an important figure for the Navajo people (Wyman, 1970).

The fact that the ritual centres on a feminine rite of passage has made the name and concept of a Blessingway an obvious source of inspiration for western women searching for a meaningful ritual during pregnancy. The problem is that it belongs to the Navajo people whose population, traditions and rituals have suffered at the hands of the West.

In a scathing critique of the way in which some groups have borrowed from other traditions, such as the Navajo for their own empowerment, Laura Donaldson calls it a form of “postmodern neo colonialism” (2001, p. 250), whilst Grimes warns against the “crass imitation or wholesale importation of other people’s rites” (2000, p. 3).

So although Blessingway is the most commonly used name for this type of ceremony, there was clearly unease amongst the women I interviewed about it. Likewise I have chosen not to use it as the title of this section, but rather Mother Blessing, in preference to Feminist Shower, which I found elsewhere in the literature (Fischer & Gainer, 1993, p. 324).

Although the names are diverse, there were clearly strong similarities between the homemade rituals the women described, and whilst some of these have resonances with the Navajo Blessingway, they also reflect many of the characteristics of other contemporary feminist rituals (Berry, 2009; Northup, 1993). Furthermore, it is interesting that the tradition of blessing women before childbirth existed within the customs of the medieval church, even though they have long since been forgotten (Franz, 1909; Knödel, 1997).

In the next chapter I will explore the theme of Mother Blessings further, when I focus on the three that emerged from my own research data. However, before I do so, I want to highlight three features from the Mother Blessings that exist within Christian feminist literature (Ruether, 1985; Neu, 2003).

The first is in relation to Ruether’s liturgy, which, although very different to the others in terms of its format, centres around the creation story found in the book of

Genesis. Ruether talks about the Mother-Spirit and Mother-God and makes strong connections between the birthing of the world and the birth of every new being.

Within the story, humans are given the gift of intelligence to make up for what they lack, but rather than using it wisely as they are charged to do, they misuse it, abusing one another and the world around them. The hope comes, in Ruether's account through the birth of every new child, through whom and with whom we each:

catch a glimpse of the original harmony and turn our feet toward the restoration of love and peace between human and human, humans and animals, humans and plants, humans and the Mother-Spirit who bears us all within her womb (1985, p. 202).

Ruether's liturgy places the act of childbirth at the centre of our hope for the future. It becomes an act towards salvation, where every child becomes the promised child and, with those involved in their birth, is touched with that same hope. As well as broadening the Christian concept of incarnation beyond the Christ child (Daly, 1986) Ruether's work can also be seen to counter the concept of female impurity through childbirth (Roll, 2003) as well as the pain of childbirth being a form of punishment (Genesis 3:16).

Thus, I would suggest, that rather than needing to borrow from the Navajo origin myth, at the heart of the Christian faith are stories of redemption, salvation and incarnation which, when reinterpreted like this, place not only Mary's birthing but every experience of childbirth at its heart. Understood in this way, the struggle, messiness and wonder of birthing becomes an opportunity for spiritual insight, rather than something that we would rather not mention in public or, worse still, is deemed to be unclean.

The second feature I would like to highlight comes from Neu's Mother Blessing where she suggests that in bringing the assembled group together, people should be invited to recall their matrilineage (2003, p. 225). Indeed, reverencing the ancestors has been observed to be a common feature of feminist ritualizing (Berry,

2009; Northup, 1997), and was incorporated within two of the women's homemade rituals, albeit in very different ways.

Jackie began her Mother Blessing by passing around a photograph of her own Mum who had died a number of years previously. In Monica's homemade ritual she asked participants to think of people within their own lives who had had a positive influence on them and share their name or experiences with the group.

The Christian tradition is also familiar with the custom of remembering those who have gone before us, whether it be within the Roman Catholic tradition through the veneration of saints, or through the Protestant understanding of "a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1). Indeed, even more widely marked within the UK at the moment is Remembrance Day, when people recognise the sacrifices made by others in war. It is less common however to be able to recall, much less remember your matrilineage, and yet I want to reinforce the point that doing so can be very empowering (Monk Kidd, 1996) and particularly poignant at this time.

The final point that I would like to make is in relation to those who are invited to a Mother Blessing. Of the homemade rituals and ritual sequences that the women described to me, the Mother Blessings were the most public in nature. In other words, in contrast to the traditional understanding of collective ritual, most of the women's ritualizing was done in private, except for the Mother Blessings, to which other women were invited.

It is also worth mentioning who the women invited. In contrast to Ruether who explicitly mentions men taking part and Neu who suggests that some men particularly the father might be invited, none of the women I interviewed invited any men to their Mother Blessing. In fact, the only person to talk about the possibility was Monica who told me that she had asked her husband if he would like to come, but he had chosen to do something different.

So, all three of the Mother Blessings mentioned to me were all female events. As a result, like the rituals described by Berry: "There [was] a strong sense of safe

community, in which women going through life-changing events are held and supported by friends whom they trust, with whom they can relax, laugh and be vulnerable" (2009, p. 176).

A further dimension to this is mentioned by Elaine Ramshaw (1987) who suggests that one of the main functions of ritual is to bond a community together. As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, support was an important issue for the women I interviewed, illustrated in the nature of their Mother Blessings. Jackie for example gave each of the women she had invited a candle to light whilst she was in labour.

Even within the small groups who were invited however, there were tensions. Jackie for example explained she felt very unsure about inviting her mother-in-law. Whilst she wanted her to be there she was very conscious of worrying about what she might think, and that it was all "a bit weird!"

Similarly, Monica described feeling embarrassed about introducing the idea of everyone painting her body cast, which had been made of her pregnant form, a few days earlier: "it's like ... there's my boob and there's my big tummy. I wasn't stark naked, but you know, it's like, your mother's there, you know!" (Interview, 17 August 2009)

The examples I have described confirm the observation made by Grimes, that "ritualizing does not typically garner broad social support; it seems too innovative, dangerously creative, and insufficiently traditional" (2000, p. 29). Indeed, I think that the tensions the women described feeling were a mixture of this and a recognition that pregnancy and birthing, indeed, women's bodies in general, are not often the focus of public ritual.

In conclusion, there are a number of examples of Mother Blessing rituals available from a range of sources. Due to the sensitivity of Blessingways, I have chosen not to explore this tradition more intrusively. Instead, I have focused on the two examples that have emerged from within the Christian feminist tradition and highlighted

three features; the broadening of incarnational theology, the recalling of a matrilineage and the issue of who should be invited, that are all relevant to the homemade rituals from within my research data and will be explored in more depth in the following chapter.

5.3.4.4 Ritual Fragments

In this final section I describe some of the fragments we have from the past that are more loosely connected with the Christian tradition. I have chosen to include this material here to reinforce the point that, rather than borrowing from other people's cultures, we can in fact draw inspiration and continue to weave from the frayed strands of what we know of our own.

To my knowledge the best source that we have to date comes from within the Celtic Christianity of the people of the Western Isles of Scotland. In the nineteenth century, a man called Alexander Carmichael spent much of his life travelling through this terrain gathering and writing down the oral poetry and songs of the people he met (1992). Although his collection is not without controversy,¹⁷ the material he gathered is the most popular and comprehensive of its kind.

Based on Carmichael's collection, and drawing on conversations that she herself had with people who still remembered some of the old traditions of these communities, Noragh Jones has written a book focusing specifically on women's Celtic spirituality (1994). It is from these two sources that I have taken some strands which can help us to glimpse what I believe would have been a rich and varied tradition, as Carmichael himself alluded to:

Birth and death, the two events of life, had many ceremonies attached to them. Many are now obsolete, and those that still live are but the echoes of those that

¹⁷ Other collectors and some researchers have criticised Carmichael of possible 'improvement' of the texts in his collection and in some cases 'forgery'. (Carmichael, 1992, pp. 11-8). It is also important to point out that there are variations between the church traditions of different parts of the Highlands. Most of Carmichael's material for example came from South Uist, where a Roman Catholic tradition, strongly influenced after the Reformation by Franciscan missionaries, preserved what, in the Protestant north (the isles of Lewis and Harris) would often be dismissed as superstitions.

were current in the past. The customs connected with life and death were so many that only a few can be mentioned (1992, p. 189).

These words form part of Carmichael's introduction to a section entitled 'Birth and Baptism' where he mentions a number of traditions and includes four blessings for a baby immediately after birth, which would have been performed by the midwife or knee-woman in lieu of the child's official baptism by a male priest, sometime later (1992, pp. 189-196).

The fact that his focus is on what happens to the baby rather than the mother should again not suggest that a woman's pregnancy and birthing was devoid of ritual. Indeed, within a culture that made no clear distinction between sacred and secular, spiritual or practical, and had blessings for tasks from kindling the fire (1992, p. 94) to consecrating the cloth (1992, p. 116), I would suggest that it is likely that there would have been a wealth of blessings and rituals to accompany a woman into motherhood.

Rather, in Carmichael's case, I think that it is important to recognise firstly that he was male, and also that he was an Excise Officer, and whilst this gave him license to travel around the area, it would also have made him an outsider, and potentially more damaging, a representative of English rule. So although Carmichael undoubtedly gathered a variety of blessings and rituals which included many that were traditionally associated with women's work, it is highly likely that it would have been deemed inappropriate for him to have shown too much interest in, never mind witnessed childbirth for himself, or been trusted with such intimacies.

As Jones suggests:

Birthing ceremonies were very much women's own, which they carried out without any male interference or even presence. They passed on the songs and traditional lore from mother to daughter, and had their own secret language for pregnancy and birth (1994, p. 78).

However, from the material Carmichael did collect, within the notes to his first volume, he mentions a ritual associated with women's labour in relation to Bride,

also known as St Brigid. Indeed, Bride played a central role within Celtic spirituality and, according to Carmichael, was known about and respected throughout Great Britain and Ireland (1992, p. 587).

In fact, there are many legends and customs associated with her, some with roots in the Christian tradition and others that go back long before, but the interweaving of these different strands developed into the figure of Bride who amongst other things, was understood to preside over fire, fertility, art and beauty.

Of particular interest, in relation to my focus on motherhood rituals is Bride's association with a woman in labour, which grew out of a story about her role in Jesus' birth. Within Carmichael's notes he wrote:

She [Bride] is much spoken of in connection with Mary, generally in relation to the birth of Christ. She was the aid-woman of the Mother of Nazareth in the lowly stable, and she is the aid-woman of the mothers of Uist in their humble homes (1992, p. 580).

Carmichael goes on to retell a story of Bride, in which she was said to have been the serving maid at an inn in Bethlehem, but was unable to give two strangers any shelter. Instead, it is said that she "gave them of her own bannock [bread] and of her own stoup of water, of which they partook at the door". When the strangers left, Bride went back into the house to discover that the bread and water that she had shared with the couple were whole again.

In her astonishment she went out to look for them, but found instead a golden light over a stable door, where it is said "she went into the stable and was in time to aid and minister to the Virgin Mother, and to receive the Child into her arms" (1992, p. 581). Thus Bride became known as the foster mother of Christ, understood, according to Carmichael, among the Highlanders as a peculiarly intimate tie "more close and more tender even than blood".

It is presumably from this story that a tradition evolved, that when a woman was in labour, the midwife would stand in the doorway of the house, and invite Bride to

enter with the words: “Bride! Bride! Come in, Thy welcome is truly made, Give though relief to the woman, And give the conception to the Trinity.”

It was then understood that if the labour went well, Bride was present, but if things went wrong, it was believed that Bride was absent and in some way offended. Although from a modern day perspective I find this latter association with Bride difficult, I think that the connection made through the person of Bride between a woman’s own labour and that of Mary is very powerful.

Firstly, because the experience of labour is a very solitary one. However much support a woman has, if she is to labour naturally, then the work is hers to do. The idea that Mary too was on her own, and a long way from the support of her family and friends, resonates with this experience, but the concept that Bride came alongside Mary, and was also believed to be present with the women of Uist, I think is very compelling, and potentially helpful to other labouring women.

Indeed, this connection is made explicit in the following words. It is not clear whether they were sung or spoken, and Carmichael does not make it obvious when they would have been used, placing it in a section of his book entitled ‘Seasons’, but the words clearly ask for Bride’s assistance in “my sickness” which was traditionally the way in which pregnancy and childbirth were referred to (Jones, 1994, p. 78).

There came to me assistance,
Mary fair and Bride;
As Anna bore Mary,
As Mary bore Christ,
As Eile bore John the Baptist
Without flaw in him,
Aid thou me in mine unbearing,
Aid me, O Bride!

As Christ was conceived of Mary
Full perfect on every hand,
Assist thou me, foster-mother,
The conception to bring from the bone;
And as thou didst aid the Virgin of joy,
Without gold, without corn, without kine,

Aid thou me, great is my sickness,
Aid me, O Bride! (1992, p. 81)

I am also interested in the connection that exists through Bride between the birth of Jesus and the birth of every child. As in the creation story of Ruether's Mother Blessing this tradition of Bride being present, broadens the concept of the incarnation from a unique event, and instead "affirm[s] the power of Being in all persons" (Daly, 1986, p. 71).

This also reinforces the importance of childbirth within the spirituality or faith lives of those involved. Rather than childbirth being an event that needs to be redeemed or spiritualized through the liturgies of the church I would argue that birthing should be seen as a site of revelation, a life cycle event full of meaning in and of itself.

A further connection with traditions associated with Bride that is interesting in relation to Mother Blessings and some of the rituals of the women I interviewed, is most clearly evident in celebrations surrounding St Brigid's Day.

According to Carmichael, on Bride's Eve girls would make the figure of a woman out of a sheaf of corn to represent Bride, which they would then dress with shells, crystals and flowers. An especially bright shell was placed over the heart of the figurine to represent the star over the stable. Once finished they would then be carried in procession through the community where the girls would visit each house. Everyone was expected to offer a gift to add to the decoration of the figurine, whilst mothers traditionally gave food, which the girls would then collect together to become Bride's Feast (Carmichael, 1992, p. 582).

The day not only seems to have been a celebration of the beginning of spring, but also of fertility, where the young women would eventually invite the young men of the community to join them to dance and sing into the night. Although the focus of St Brigid's day was not specifically on motherhood, its associations with fertility and relationships as well as the giving of natural or crafted gifts and food has strong

resonances with some of the Mother Blessing events that I have previously described and that emerged from my interview data.

Lastly, I want to include in this section some other information offered by Jones, who used excerpts from Carmichael's book alongside the memories of more contemporary women who lived on the Western Isles, because I think links can be made between several of the marked or remembered moments described to me and some of these older traditions.

Jones for example says that herbs were used in various ways to help a woman through pregnancy and labour, with artemisia, a sharply aromatic pungent herb being made into an infusion for drinking to relieve the pains of labour. She also suggests that pearlwort which was the most revered plant of all for protection against danger, was put underneath a woman in labour and sewn into her bodice during pregnancy (1994, pp. 78-9).

This clearly resonates with the wise women's traditions researched by Ehrenreich and English (2010) but was also a theme that emerged from some of the stories of the women I interviewed. In fact Ali, Ruth and Jackie all talked about using natural remedies to help them through labour and their healing after childbirth.

Jones also describes the custom amongst crofting women, who lived in the old black houses, of giving birth in the warmest place in the house, on a temporary bed of straw plied up in front of the fire (1994, p. 73), and the way in which the midwife or knee-woman was well respected within the community for her work (1994, p. 79).

Again there are strong connections between the improvised, comfortable spaces created by the crofting women and some of birthing spaces devised by the women I interviewed, particularly Ruth and Ali, as I will explore in more detail in the next chapter. They were also among a number of women who described the importance of the presence and role of a doula. In the modern day context, the women's

employment of a doula can be likened to the role of a traditional midwife and the kind of respect that her work amongst women often seems to have engendered.

It is of course possible to argue that these links are tenuous and that the contrast between the harsh realities of the past and the relative comfort of the modern day makes any comparison seem impertinent. There is also a temptation to romanticize, and the risk of twisting long held beliefs for modern day use is not without its pitfalls. I am also aware of the risk of making sweeping generalisations, due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence.

However, I am also aware of my own need and the desire of other modern day mothers to mark and reflect upon our experiences, and rather than doing so in a void, or borrowing from other traditions, I believe that it is possible to connect our ritual needs with fragments of the past that have more in common with our own background or faith traditions. Indeed, there are a number of connections between the customs explored in this section and some of the ritualizing that the women I interviewed described, such as the creation of comfortable birthing spaces and the sharing of food to create a feast.

I am also drawn to the story of Bride who came alongside Mary as she laboured. Partly because it symbolises the importance of support for a labouring woman, as with Jackie's giving out of candles or the support of birth coaches and doulas. Also because it helps to make the point that the experience of birthing is impregnated with meaning, and therefore not something that needs to be purified or spiritualised by the church, but rather, understood. The role that their birthing experience and transition into motherhood played in the faith lives and patterns of spirituality of the women I interviewed is the focus of chapter 7.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have concluded my mapping exercise by providing both an academic and historical context to which the women's ritualizing relates and can be better understood. I have created working definitions of homemade rituals and

ritual sequences in order to describe and locate the women's actions within the wider field of ritual studies and I have highlighted five other features which help to establish their place within a contemporary, feminist genre.

In order to provide the historical context within which the women's ritualizing is situated I have then given a personal account of how I felt at the time of my own birthing, not to be aware of any relevant rituals, and then explored some of the reasons why this was the case.

Finally, I have explored resources that do exist, both within contemporary feminist literature, secular customs and from the past. These not only help to locate my research data within a tradition of feminist theology and women's ritualizing but it has also helped me to establish a lens through which I have been able to make connections between the past and the present. Along with the experience based context provided in the previous chapter I have created a framework into which I can both introduce and explore the ritualizing of the women I interviewed, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6: HOMEMADE RITUALS & RITUAL
SEQUENCES

Afterbirth

In the Highlands in 1970, my father-in-law was told by the doctor attending the homebirth of his daughter to throw the afterbirth in the fire before daybreak. It isn't clear whether this custom was borne out of superstition or necessity, but it is easy nowadays, particularly in the context of a hospital birth, to dismiss rituals as unnecessary and old fashioned.

However, I don't believe that the ritualizing described to me by the women was superstitious or quaint.

After their baby was born, Mary and Joseph had to improvise. They found a trough, usually used to hold animal feed, in order to create a safe and comfortable cradle for their baby.

The women I interviewed also improvised in their ritualizing. Like Mary, their actions were creative and sometimes spontaneous. They were often attempts to create space within which something precious could be marked or held.

Another custom that I have come across involves burying the placenta in order for it to nourish a new plant.

Rather than being unnecessary or old fashioned, I would argue that the women's ritualizing was also a way of nourishing the soil out of which their new identities could blossom and flourish.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the ritualizing of the women I interviewed. I have divided my research data regarding rituals into three, reflecting the normal progression that a woman experiences, beginning with pregnancy, continuing into childbirth and followed by the postnatal period.

Although this pattern is useful in terms of clarity, it is also important to recognise that there is some overlap between the three phases. Some of the gathering activities described in section one for example are in preparation for birth which is the focus of section two. Thus, some activities will be mentioned in two sections, but will only be explored fully in one.

Partly because of this, and due to the number of activities mentioned by the women, each of the three sections has a corresponding summary diagram. Each diagram illustrates the women's activities in terms of ritual sequences and are colour coded to show homemade rituals as well as marked and remembered moments.

6.2 Pre-paring & Gathering Rituals: Ritual Activities during Pregnancy

This section relates to the table shown in Appendix 2.

6.2.1 Background to Ritual Activities during Pregnancy

The homemade rituals and ritual sequences that I have gathered under this heading all took place during pregnancy, and whilst their forms varied, they were all attempts by the women to prepare themselves either for childbirth or motherhood, and sometimes both. I have chosen the title Pre-paring partly to reflect this point. Janet for example described a holiday that she and her husband had taken before the birth of her daughter as a “long term reservoir ... that you can reach back into ... like a well to go back to” (Interview, 10 May 2010).

Janet also mentioned that she had decided to go on retreat before she gave birth and used the analogy of an anchor, explaining the way in which the retreat had acted as a steady point before all the uncertainty that she was heading into: "it gave you a sense of yourself ... I suppose I started out with a real sense of security." In a similar vein, Jackie talked about the way in which her Mother Blessing had given her a sense of "confidence" as she approached the birth (Interview, 20 March 2012) whilst Monica described feeling "psyched up" by hers (Interview, 17 August 2009).

However, in order to prepare themselves for motherhood the women also described ways in which their ritualizing was designed to help them acknowledge and symbolically begin to leave elements of their previous life and identity behind. So the activities that the women described to me helped the women to prepare, but also begin to *pare* aspects of their old lifestyle away.

Self-identity and freedom were mentioned by a number of the women in relation to things that they knew they would lose or need to leave behind. Jackie talked about her fear of losing her identity, whilst Maria's Mother Blessing was designed to help her confront aspects of her past, and thus pare away some of her unwanted baggage.

Journaling was another way in which some of the women chose to prepare themselves by working through and thus paring away some of their concerns. One woman for example described the way in which journaling her thoughts helped her to change her feelings about being pregnant, and ultimately choosing to keep the baby:

I wanted to change some of my thinking about my pregnancy ... So, I started to read things, searched on the internet, read articles, talked to people and asked their experiences ... of early pregnancy and motherhood ... I didn't write everything down, but I sifted ... and wrote down anything that I thought I could use as positive.

Ali also mentioned the way in which writing and drawing were important to her during pregnancy. The independent birth group that she was part of had explained

that recognising and acknowledging your fears about childbirth and motherhood can play an important role in helping to prepare a mother to birth naturally, and increase the chances of her having a safe birth. Ali explained:

So much comes up in that antenatal time ... I've read somewhere that calls it caging your tigers,¹⁸ so for birth to go smoothly, you need to get your endorphins up, [which help to block the perception of pain] and your stress levels [adrenalin] down. So your inner fears, and part of that is the generations of fear that now surround birth for lots of different reasons ... and our own personalities and just what's getting in the way ... Each birth brought up different tigers (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Indeed, for different reasons three of the women chose to hold a homemade ritual in the form of a Mother Blessing, or used ritualized actions such as journaling to help to prepare themselves, and for some this included paring away unwanted baggage or fears so that they could birth and mother more freely. However, there were other elements within their ritualized behaviour during this time that I have chosen to describe as Gathering.

In the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, (Carle, 1969) which Jemma used to retell her own story of early motherhood, the caterpillar gathers together a range of food which he then eats before building his cocoon. In a similar vein, a number of the women described a variety of ways in which they gathered together resources during their pregnancies in order to prepare themselves.

In terms of ritualized behaviour the women described this activity of gathering in two ways. First of all, Monica, Maria and Jackie all created Mother Blessings to which they invited a group of female friends and relations. The invited guests to these homemade rituals ranged in numbers from three to eight but also included people who could not be physically present.

¹⁸ (England & Horowitz, 1998, p. 118)

Both Maria and Jackie for example had a photograph of their mothers who were not able to be there as part of the ceremony, and Monica described the way in which she asked people to remember their ancestors: “we had red cards to represent them and people either just wrote a name or ... the idea really was then to light candles, the flame representing their ongoing presence with us and ... their inspiration (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Monica also explained that she had sent invitations to female friends who lived abroad “because I wanted them to know that they were invited ... because they were close to me and ‘cos they were interested as mothers.” So, one of the features of the three Mother Blessings was that each of the women gathered others around her, and collected from them wisdom and memories as a way of preparing themselves.

Indeed, although Janet’s situation was different, she described approaching childbirth with a sense that she had been “affirmed” by the group of women she had met on retreat. Although these women were not part of her close network of friends and family, they were all Christian women, and therefore in some way represented Janet’s faith and the wider church community of which she is a part.

Some women chose to employ a doula or arranged for people to attend the birth as their birthing partner or coach; these are more examples of the women gathering people around them. These actions were clearly taken during pregnancy and the conversations that took place during that time can be seen as part of the women’s preparations for birthing.

However, as well as gathering people, the women also talked about gathering together resources to help them during labour. Ali for example explained the importance to her during her second pregnancy of gathering knowledge and putting practical arrangements in place: “If I wanted her [daughter] to be born naturally then I had to just step up, I had to just quickly strengthen up and get on with it and sort it out” (Interview, 19 November 2010).

This gathering of resources also included taking elements of the women's Mother Blessings with them into labour. Monica for example described packing a birth box to take with her into hospital "with some of the things from that evening". Similarly, Maria recalled taking a blanket and a candle that were given to her at her Mother Blessing and Jackie described singing a song during labour that had initially been part of her homemade ritual:

when she [a friend] gave me the bead, it had a song that went with it ... 'O let the motion of the ocean do all of the work ...' so, I sang it when I was in labour ... a friend who had been at that gathering was there as my birthing partner, so she was kind of carrying that song with her and remembering with me (Interview, 20 March 2012).

Although all of the women I interviewed approached their birthing and motherhood in different ways, three of them described holding a homemade ritual, each of which shared features with what I have chosen to call Mother Blessings, as described in the previous chapter. Monica also described creating what she referred to as a Maternity Blessing which she used to mark the beginning of her maternity leave from work.

Some of these homemade rituals also formed part of a ritual sequence which included remembered moments, particularly journaling as well as marked moments such as a holiday. It was through these ritualizing activities that some of the women sought to Gather and Pre-pare themselves during pregnancy for the journey ahead.

6.2.2 Exploring the Performative Power of Ritual

In the previous section I have used the concepts of preparation and gathering to characterize the nature of the women's ritualizing during this period. Some of the actions that I have described were very practical, such as going on holiday, journaling or gathering resources. However, other methods that the women used were less tangible but equally powerful. In this section, I want to focus on the three Mother Blessings from my data, to explore the way in which the performative power of words and actions within a ritual setting can effect change.

Austin (1976) was a British philosopher of language who during the twentieth century developed a theory of speech acts, through which he suggested that we use language to *do* things as well as to *say* things. Thus, he introduced the concept of a performative sentence or utterance to describe the way in which some sayings, rather than describing an action or issuing a command, actually do what they say they do. So through the words ‘I now pronounce you to be husband and wife’ two people are understood to become married if certain criteria are also met, such as the time and place and the authentic status of the celebrant.

The possibility that a word or action can be performative is key to understanding the potential power of ritual. Based on his fieldwork amongst the Tsembaya people, the anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1979) argued that rituals can effect real change beyond the event itself. Although the effect is not always the same as the purpose of a ritual, Rappaport gave examples of the way in which the ritual cycles of the Tsembaya people could have repercussions on their relationships with neighbouring tribes. However, for him and others such as Tambiah (1985), the performative power of a ritual is particularly dependent on its fixed and invariable nature, and less reliant on the thoughts and feelings of those involved.

In contrast to this view, others would argue that rituals do not have to be fixed and invariable to be performative. Brown (2003) for example, focuses on the thoughts and feelings of participants which, he argues, can produce a creative tension between what is scripted to happen and what actually occurs during the performance of a ritual. Thus, for Brown: “To speak of performance is not merely to be concerned with the intricate form of the event as envisaged by the script, but also, to explore the unscripted dimensions of the activity” (2003, p. 5).

Indeed, Grimes (2000) and Driver (2006) are amongst those who argue that it is the fixed and invariable nature of many religious rituals that have led to the need for new and reinvented rites, and who also emphasise the intentions of the participants. Grimes argues that a ritual is only effective if it makes serious demands on those involved. Indeed, he contrasts the power of a rite that only touches people

at the time with more effective rites of passage that are enacted. The latter, he argues “carry us from here to there in such a way that we are unable to return to square one. To enact any kind of rite is to *perform*, but to enact a rite of passage is also to *transform*” (2000, p. 7).

In a similar vein, Driver suggests that rituals should not simply be understood as an expression of what we think or feel. Rather, effective rituals should also be capable of changing our outlook and potentially altering the way we act in the future. Driver notes that: “Rites of passage are performed not simply to *mark* transitions but to *effect* them” (2006, p. 93).

Another difference between these two schools of thought is worth mentioning. For both Rappaport and Tambiah, the performative character of ritual is one of the features that helps to reinforce and maintain the status quo. Whilst Grimes and Driver both accept that this can be a function of ritual, however they also recognise its potential to become oppressive. In other words, both sides recognize the potential power of performative ritual, but Grimes and Driver also emphasize its ability to “subvert, reconstruct and transform” (Berry, 2009, p. 203).

6.2.3 The Performative Power of the Women’s Mother Blessings

From the Mother Blessings that emerged from my research data I have chosen a range of examples to show the way in which the women used performative words and actions in their ritualizing, in the hope of effecting change. The first story is based on Monica’s homemade ritual which she created to address some of her own concerns during pregnancy.

At one stage she invited guests to think of a personal attitude or habit that they would like to be rid of or something that they were aware of that was coming to an end. She had placed a broomstick in the hallway and wanted people to make a sweeping action, to symbolically brush away their habit or ending into the fireplace of an adjoining room.

For Monica, this was a way of marking the losses that she feared would come about after the birth of her baby: “that sort of loss really of my own time ... freedom. Things that were really, really huge for me ... they were the things that I had really wrestled with a lot ... right to the end” (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Unfortunately, on the night itself, for a number of practical reasons this part of the ceremony was not enacted. Thankfully Monica had also done a great deal of reflective work through her journal and in creating the ceremony which helped to prepare her for the birth. Yet the potential power of performative action suggests that if Monica had been able to enact her sweeping, the effect upon her might have been even more profound.

However, Jackie also described experiencing some of the same fears. She explained to me that with the help of a friend, she had devised a symbolic journey for herself as part of the ritual, in which each of the guests would take on different roles. Jackie’s journey took place in a garden where there was a bowl of water and a washing line, draped with a veil:

I first stood behind the veil and washed my hands. The woman there asked me what I was leaving behind ... for me at that point it was all about leaving behind ... the predictability of the known world, and also ... my independence really. I knew that once I got to the other side I was no longer only my own person. I think that that’s probably the biggest kick about being a mother, yeah? (she looks toward me for acknowledgment, I nod) There is no decision you make that doesn’t impact on another person’s life (Interview, 20 March 2012).

She then described her hesitancy at the thought of having to go through the veils: “I really didn’t want to. That was the strongest feeling at the time ... some of it I think was about sort of stage fright, and maybe sort of birth fright as well!” Jackie said that it took her a long time to summon up the courage to go through the veils to the other side but that she was helped by having a friend with her, who would also be there as her birthing partner during labour. She could also hear some of her friends singing to her from the other side of the veil: “Eventually, I got there and I was

crying ... And then all of a sudden I had, these people around me, who put a wreath on my head and a scarf around me."

Although Jackie talked about her surprise at how deeply the symbolic journey had affected her, I think that understanding the way in which performative action can work within ritual can shed some light on this. Whilst Jackie's homemade ritual did not follow a rubric in the way that Rappaport and Tambiah suggest, she was actively involved in its creation and deeply engaged with its meaning. Indeed, not only did it overpower her at the time, but in her book, Jackie describes the way in which the ritual helped to change the way she felt about the birth:

I am sure that this preparation enabled me to approach the birth with more confidence and less fear. As the time drew near I felt more and more calm and deeply centred, and when I went into labour I was in a very positive frame of mind (Singer, 2009, p. 60).

The final example that I have chosen to focus on again shows the powerful effect of the performance of embodied action, but also involves instances that I want to suggest are akin to performative utterances. Maria involved two of her close friends in the creation of her Mother Blessing, in whom she had confided that she was concerned about the prospect of having a baby girl. In her interview, she explained to me that her own mother had been very young when Maria was born, and knowing that she had been a 'mistake' had negatively affected their relationship as well as the way she saw herself and viewed women in general:

I used to say to my friends, 'I don't want a girl. I'm just not ready to have a daughter.' I just, I felt as though it was going to be difficult ... Too many issues! I used to think, I can't empower a girl because I'm not empowered ... I was so confused (Interview, 6 June 2012).

Maria had sensed early on in the pregnancy that she was carrying a girl and when it was later confirmed during a scan, she became aware that she needed to try to change the way she felt. The idea of creating a welcoming space for her daughter

became important. In her interview, Maria explained; “it was awful for my mother at seventeen. In school! She didn’t know what to do”.

In contrast to the sense of not being wanted and of there being no space for her, Maria explained that she wanted to hold her Mother Blessing in the room that she and her husband were living in at the time:

I had that room all ready for her. There was a little kind of station, you know, where you put the nappies and things like that. I had it ready for her, with her clothes ... I wanted her to be born in this space ... and [for her to] know that I am waiting for you. You are so welcome and wanted, we are waiting for you!

Another feature of this welcoming, was that Maria had chosen her daughter’s name before the birth:

in the ritual we didn’t just say, ‘the baby’. We used her name. We talked *to* Hannah and we talked *about* Hannah ... obviously she was not yet born but at that point it was really ... like Hannah was so real and I really felt the presence of ... I mean obviously she was in me, but she was there ... She was mentioned by name. She was already a human being!

Clearly, the practical actions of making the room ready for her daughter, holding her Mother Blessing in the same room and calling her daughter by name all had the effect of making Hannah’s presence more real to Maria. Although perhaps not strictly performative utterances, calling her baby by name in this way and asking her friends to do likewise acted in a similar way. Hannah had not yet been born but was being spoken about and spoken to as a real person.

Indeed, as well as calling her by name Maria’s friends gave her gifts for Hannah such as hair clips, necklaces and a “baby girl blanket to wrap her in”. They had also written a card full of blessings for her. As well as helping her to welcome Hannah, the friends also made Maria feel special. They had laid out the blanket on the floor of the room and alongside the hair clips and necklaces a harmonizing candle was placed and lit. They presented Maria with eggs as a symbol of birth and a red

butterfly as a symbol of transformation. "While they were giving me these things," Maria recalled, "they talked a lot about empowerment."

There was also a book entitled *Birth and Beyond* (Gordon, 2002) which had been handed on from woman to woman as each had become pregnant. They had all signed it and Maria described the significance of the book to her as "like the Bible. It's kind of a magic book." Finally, the women concluded the Mother Blessing by drinking pink champagne and eating fairy cakes. Maria smiled as she recalled the details during the interview, saying, "We entered a space of indulgence!"

Maria's homemade ritual was filled with embodied actions such as gift giving as well as eating and drinking together. There were symbols such as the eggs, a butterfly and a book which were important because of what they represented rather than because they were either conventional or religious. Maria explained to me that she felt overwhelmed at the time and sensed that something "important" and "spiritual" had happened in the room. She also talked about the way in which the ritual helped to carry her through labour and the birth.

Of significance too, is that Maria also talked about a change in her relationship with her mother:

There has been a healing ... Before I saw 'the mother' and what she did and didn't do. But now I really see the woman and I see that woman with compassion ... and I couldn't, couldn't do that before ... I didn't have compassion for myself, so how could I have it for anyone else? ... I remember the ritual helping me ... it's been three years, and I know that [there is] a link with Hannah, and the ritual, and my thoughts of healing as well, obviously!

This goes back to one of Grimes' (2000) points in which he compares a rite which only touches people at the time with an enacted rite of passage in which people are intimately engaged. The transformation that Maria describes happened not because of any magical words, nor due to its ancient or repetitive form. Indeed, Maria's Mother Blessing was a one off and became transformative because of the

demands that the ritual made on her. As she herself says, it was her thoughts of healing and her personal reflections on that process that enabled the performative words and actions of the ritual to have the effect they did.

Although Maria was clearly aware of the role that her own thinking had had on the effectiveness of the ritual, she also said:

When I was doing the ritual ... I didn't know that my relationship with my mother was going to change ... That I was going to feel different about it. What I was going to feel. I didn't know any of that, but ... it was happening, but I didn't know it was happening.

Maria's reflection connects with Bell's (1992) concept of misrecognition, by which Bell suggests that participants are not aware of the strategies being used in ritual and instead attribute the outcome to a divine or transcendent power. Clearly, in Maria's case, this was not so. As the earlier excerpt from her interview implied, she was very aware of the role of her own thinking and reflection in the healing process. Instead, as I said in the previous chapter, I am inclined to agree with Berry who argues that enacting your own ritual "suggests a conscious intention or agency" (Berry, 2009, p. 125).

However, based on Maria's comment I also want to suggest that there is an element of unknowing and hope in any ritual action. It's rather like buying a present. If you buy yourself a treat, you know that you will like it. When you buy someone else a gift, you do so hoping that they will like it, but not necessarily knowing. Within any performative action or utterance I would argue there is an energy, which, if worked with rather than forgotten, has the potential power to transform. In Maria's case, she was able to create a homemade ritual with her friends which had a power beyond itself to change her feelings about herself, the prospect of having a daughter and her relationship with her own mother. She couldn't force any of those things to happen but she enabled them through engaging with the performative power of ritual in a creative way.

In conclusion, within this section I have given an overview of the ritualizing that the women described to me as happening during their pregnancies. Whilst a range of activities were mentioned they all had two themes in common; those of preparation and gathering. I then went on to introduce the concept of performative rituals to explain some of the potential power of such events and explored the way in which the three Mother Blessings described to me reflected this theory. Based on these examples, I would suggest that the performative character of rituals is a helpful tool in dealing with some of the fears and concerns that can emerge for women during pregnancy.

6.3 Wombing and Cocooning Rituals: Ritual Activities around the time of Birth

This section relates to the table shown in Appendix 3.

6.3.1 Background to Ritual Activities around the time of Birth

By the very nature of their timing, the ritualised behaviours that I have chosen to explore under this heading are more private than those in the previous section. Although some of them share characteristics with the homemade rituals already mentioned, this phase was predominated by marked and remembered moments. They all occurred around the time of birthing itself, and can each be characterised in one way or another as attempts by the women to create space.

For some, this involved making a personalised space in which to labour. As already mentioned in the previous section, the women who held a Mother Blessing took items from their ritual into labour. However, the concept of creating space was also an important feature of some of the women's stories after birth. Ali and Ruth for example both described forging a lying in period for themselves, whilst others mentioned less tangible but equally significant efforts to create a space into which they could welcome their baby.

In some ways it could be argued that by describing the latter I am straying into rituals that focus on the baby rather than the mother, but because of the uniquely

intimate nature of this time I have chosen to include these moments. Indeed, from within the literature around the physiology of birth, Klaus and Kennell (1982) talk about the existence of a “sensitive time” immediately after birth during which essential bonding between a mother and her baby is most likely to take place.

Although other research refutes this claim (Eyer, 1992), Davis- Floyd’s experience mirrors my own research data, when she writes:

Time and again I heard women describe highly technocratic labor experiences that were alienating up until the moment of birth as ‘positive’ and ‘wonderful’ because of the intensity of the joy they experienced upon touching and gazing at their newborn babies (2003, p. 145).

From within my own research data, Elaine wrote in her journal:

All I could do was stare at her and cry ... I never took my eyes off her ... All that day, she slept for relatively long periods of time (4 to 5 hours) and I watched her. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was so perfect and so ... beautiful ... and I loved her so (Journal entry, transcribed).

Whilst this is not every woman’s experience, it is important for me to recognise that from within my small sample of women, the time immediately after birth was often described as precious and unique. Indeed, if this period is potentially significant regarding the bonding between mother and baby, then including marked or remembered moments that were created by the women to hold and mark this time out is significant, particularly for the mother. As Monica rather humorously recognised in a remark made during her interview: “The baby and I did a thing in hospital ... she had no choice in the matter, you know, she was just present” (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Within this section I have gathered together ritualized actions described by the women and done around the birth itself to create protective, personalised spaces that I have chosen to call ‘wombing’ and ‘cocooning’ rituals. The idea of cocooning

goes back to the life cycle of a butterfly, which featured as a symbol in both Jemma and Maria's ritualizing and was mentioned by Ruth in relation to one of her experiences of labour when she recalled feeling "cocooned in love" (Interview, 10 May 2010) by her husband and birth partners who were trying to protect her from what they felt was the unnecessary intrusion and panic of the NHS midwives.

In her book, *Birthing from Within* Pam England also uses the metaphor encouraging women to create a "birth cocoon" around themselves, explaining:

One of the most difficult things for a mother to come to terms with is that she cannot predict or control her birth ... Fortunately, it's not just the birth *place* that makes your birth memorable or powerful, it's you and what you bring to it ... spin an insulating cocoon of love and warmth around each other as you bring your baby into the world (1998, p. 83).

The idea of the mother herself being in a womb is not only evocative of a protective space, but also acts to reinforce the idea that the woman is also going through a transformative birthing process in becoming a mother. The idea of giving birth to yourself is not a new idea¹⁹. However, during labour some of my interviewees described feeling like a "portal" or a "vehicle" rather than an individual in their own right, and as I have already tried to describe, the emergence of the mother is often subsumed by the arrival of a new baby.

Indeed, the metaphor of wombing is also used by Philips (2011) in relation to her research into the spirituality and faith of girls on the verge of adolescence. She uses the term to describe the way in which a Christian community can become a nurturing environment in which girls can find support as they transition to

¹⁹ In *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich writes extensively about the importance of a woman giving birth to herself (1977, p. 184). In another example, in her exhibition 'The Last Great Adventure is You' Tracy Emin created a picture in which she depicted a woman birthing another woman. Explaining its meaning in an interview with John Snow for Channel 4 News, Emin explained that she felt that she had at last given birth to herself, to her creative potential (Emin, 2014).

adulthood: “A girl’s ‘wombing’ enables the growth of her identity symbiotically with the holding environment” (2011, p. 144).

Similarly, I have chosen to use the metaphor of the womb to reflect the way in which some of the women I have interviewed created spaces around themselves which helped to hold them in a time of uncertainty. The women were also deeply connected to their created spaces because the people and artefacts were personally chosen by them and thus I will also argue that the spaces helped to reinforce their identity at a time of transition.

6.3.2 Creating Birthing Spaces

In a similar way to the crofting women who birthed on an improvised bed of straw in the warmest part of their home, a number of the women I interviewed sought to create improvised spaces around themselves in which they would feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible during labour.

As I have already mentioned Maria, Jackie and Monica all took items from their Mother Blessing with them into labour. Although the items varied from beads to blankets and candles to a song, each was significant to the individual woman because they were laden with memories. They were also deeply personal and, importantly, transportable. Indeed, Monica talked about creating what she called a ‘Birth Box’ to take with her to the hospital which included artefacts from her ritual, but also:

some of the inspiring things I’d come across and symbols
and [photos of] people and one or two short comments ...
and I took my little goddess figure with me, the little
Venus of love ... I had her in my hand for most of the time
during labour when I was here [at home] and then on the
way to hospital (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Although she did not hold a Mother Blessing, Ali also described creating a space around herself that was personalized and could be taken with her when she moved from home to the hospital during her first labour:

I wanted a kit that I could take with me so I went to a haberdashery shop and bought some bits of material ... gorgeous reds ... and three crystals ... and I remember taking music ... [and] aromatherapy oils (Interview, 19 November 2010).

In the same way as singing the song from her Mother Blessing during labour created continuity for Jackie, Monica and Ali both mentioned taking a box or kit with them for the same reason. The items all helped the women to create a transportable space around themselves that helped them to focus and was deeply personal and empowering.

However, not all of the women's efforts to create space were transportable. After her first labour for example, Ali felt more confident and committed to the idea of having a home birth, so for her second birthing she asked her husband to create a space for her in the shed in their garden:

he made it into a cave basically. You know, just loads and loads of layers. Probably three or four layers of blankets and the heater was in there and the [birthing] pool, some music and a bean bag. Oh and we made a loo in there. We just put the nappy bucket under a chair without a seat ... it was, the perfect place to be (Interview, 19 November 2010).

For her third birthing experience Ali's space making was different again. This time, she didn't want to be too far away from her other children and so she decided to create a space in the lounge:

I think about a week before I gave birth I came and slept down here from then on. It was my little domain from then on and because it was more comfortable and because I didn't get woken up by toddlers and gradually I just started preparing it and so I used the bunting from our wedding. It went twice round the room ... there were throws, just beautiful images up.

Similarly, in preparation for one of her younger children's arrival, Ruth described to me the way in which she had stuck pictures, prayers and readings on the walls of one of the rooms at home. Like Monica, Ruth explained to me that they were all

things that she had found during her pregnancy that were either meaningful to her at the time, or she believed would be helpful to her in labour.

During labour she then described drawing strength from the walls around her, and when she could no longer focus on them herself, she asked her husband and birthing partners to “read the walls” to her. From amongst the resources, she described pictures of flowers opening and of mothers cradling their babies, as well as a Celtic prayer for protection.²⁰

Whether the items were transportable or not, there is a sense in which these examples are all attempts by the women to find ways of being accompanied through their labour by things that were familiar and empowering. In the unfamiliar territory of labour the concept of having something that would tether them to earth, to ‘normality’, became important.

Indeed, I would imagine that one of the important roles of the traditional midwife and the neighbouring women who attended births in the past was to surround the labouring woman with familiar words, blessings and incantations to aid her progress. The presence of women that she knew and knew her, and who were present throughout her journey would also have provided continuity.

The lack of continuity of care, as already mentioned, was a concern for a number of the women I interviewed and was one of the reasons why, often in addition to the father of the baby, some of them also chose to have a female birthing partner or a doula present. The concept of employing a doula is still a relatively unknown practice here in the UK at the moment, although a number of the women I interviewed mentioned having one.

Traditionally, just as experienced mothers have assisted other mothers through labour (England & Horowitz, 1998, p. 207), a doula is a trained labour assistant who provides support and nurtures a mother through pregnancy, labour and the

²⁰ The Rune of St Patrick.

postnatal period. In advocating their role, Pam England writes to prospective mothers:

Asking your husband to be your sole guide through labor
is like asking him to lead the way on a climb of Mt.
Everest. He may be smart and trustworthy, you may love
him, but in the Himalayas you'd both be a lot better off
with a Sherpa! (England & Horowitz, 1998, p. 207)

Echoing this advice, the women who did have a doula all mentioned how helpful they had been, often on account of their wisdom but also because of their role as the woman's advocate, although others mentioned a homeopath or close friend in the same way. In describing the role of an Independent midwife in one of her births, Ruth explained that although it had cost them financially, her presence was invaluable, "because I felt safe" (Interview, 10 May 2010).

Another source of strength during labour was described by Jackie, when she explained the effect upon her of knowing that the women who had attended her Mother Blessing would be lighting the candles that she had given them: "I think there were places when I just leant back into that feeling of being held by those women and I did really feel that they were ... they were part of it and they were holding me" (Interview, 20 March 2012).

From decorated spaces to surrounding themselves with support, a number of the women described ways in which they had sought to empower themselves during labour, some of which have resonances with what we know from the past.

6.3.3 Creating Spaces Shortly After Birth

What we know of the time after birth from the past is predominated by actions traditionally performed by the midwife. These might have included blessings of the baby and when necessary a baptism, (Carmichael, 1992, pp. 189-196) but I am not aware of any customs that would have been performed by the mother herself.

In spite of this, amongst the women I interviewed this was talked about as a very special time, even amongst those who were not feeling particularly well

immediately after the birth. Monica for example described “feeling like death, but I was also very, very happy” (Interview, 17 August 2009). In relation to her experience Maria said that it was “intimate” and described feeling as though she and her baby were in a “bubble, and I did not want to be disturbed” (Interview, 6 June 2012).

Amongst her remembered moments, Ruth described the way in which the whole family got into bed with her after her youngest son’s birth: “David [her husband] fell asleep … and I remember sitting in amongst them all, feeling so pleased and thankful” (Interview, 10 May 2010). As well as remembering particular moments, a number of the women also described marking moments during this time.

Janet and her husband had decided that as soon as they could after the birth they would ask the hospital staff for some privacy. They had chosen two different passages from the Bible which corresponded with the names that they had chosen for a boy or a girl and they wanted to read one of these by way of reflecting on what had just happened and naming their child: “we just read that [Hannah’s song] and then had a bit of quiet. After we’d read it we just let the words stay there for a bit and just quietly sat with each other for a bit” (Interview, 10 May 2010).

This sense of achievement combined with the desire to welcome a baby is also evident in Elaine’s story. Rather than words from the Bible, Elaine used her own words and the view from the hospital window. She later captured this moment in a poem which she wrote for her daughter’s birthday some years later:

The morning sun moved across the sky.
Standing at the window,
my back to the antiseptic surroundings,
I held you,
blanketed and hatted,
and showed you
the patience of the mountains
and the shimmer of new snow.
Welcome to the world, little one.
The adventure begins.
(Personal correspondence, 23 October 2010)

Whilst Janet and Elaine chose to welcome their babies differently they both sought to reach out beyond the intimacy of the birthing space to the world beyond.

Similarly, Monica described using the contents of her birth box, to create a special welcome for her baby in the hospital, a few days after the birth:

I sort of decorated around the bed ... I put up two or three images to introduce her to some other things ... some very lovely pictures ... And then my nieces had chosen particular things ... confetti ... and I just got the pictures and the confetti and put them all around her ... and then there were these little tiny stones that they had picked up off the beach ... [one] because it's lovely and its smooth and this one because it's bumpy ... and they didn't say what they meant, but they did feel nice, so I put them in the baby's hand ... and then I just made something up ... and I repeated it over and over again so that I could try and remember it ... sort of like a little chant kind of thing (Interview, 17 August 2009).

Although some of these moments were very much focused on the baby, clearly at the time they were of most importance and significance to the mother. It was of course they who initiated them, and also they who would potentially later tell their child about it, as Elaine clearly did through her poem. The marked and remembered moments around the birth had significance at the time for the mother and later in some cases also for the child, as they became woven into the birth narrative and the child's own story. As Janet described: "Hannah's been reading Hannah's song in one way or another ever since" (Interview, 10 May 2010).

6.3.4 Creating Lying-In Spaces

The last feature of the women's ritualised actions around birth involved some of the women consciously carving out more time for themselves and their babies, in what Ali referred to as her Babymoon, and Ruth described as a Lying-In period. Both women had consciously borrowed the idea from the past or other cultures, and did so not in response to any feelings of uncleanliness, which has traditionally been associated with this custom, but rather because they felt that they and their baby needed time and space to recover.

After one of her births for example, Ruth said: "I stayed on my bed for 7 days, with 1 chair next to the bed for visitors" (Interview, 10 May 2010) whilst Ali described wanting to extend her time for longer and longer:

I remember lots of conversations with Rachel [her doula] on the phone and we'd say, the Chinese tradition is ten days perhaps, and then on day eleven I'd ring up and say, what about other traditions I could try ... I certainly remember my first proper outing was at about five weeks (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Although Ruth and Ali specifically marked out this time, other women for a variety of reasons also experienced time apart from their normal routines in a very positive way. Sometimes this was due to an extended stay in hospital, as was the case for Monica and Maria, whilst for others it was simply due to circumstance. Elaine for example told me that her Mum had come to visit after hearing that she had gone into labour. Elaine described her Mum's visit in her journal in the following way:

We spent the next two weeks talking, and laughing and admiring Katie. Mum cooked incredible meals, cleaned my entire house (windows and floors included!) ... I discovered how similar we were and how very much I like her and loved her (Journal entry, transcribed).

Although each woman's experience and labour was different, clearly there were attempts by a number of the women to create space around their birthing. Sometimes this was focused around the time of labour, but others included it after the birth. This enabled the women to consciously make the most of the precious nature of those moments shortly after birth and then around the first days and sometimes weeks beyond.

Thus, some of their ritualizing involved creating spaces and others focused on time, but perhaps most significantly any time apart was not in response to feelings of uncleanliness. I also want to suggest that the women's actions went beyond a desire simply to decorate the space. To explore the significance of their actions more fully I want to turn to some of the theory that exists around the use of space in ritual.

6.3.5 The Significance of Creating Space around Birth

Although customs relating to the seclusion of women around the time of childbirth have often been the subject of anthropological study, less has been written about the psychological effect of this kind of space and time upon a new mother. Indeed, due to its common association with impurity it is easy to dismiss such customs as outdated and patriarchal. However, the space making around childbirth described by the women I have mentioned was done by choice.

Whilst space making around childbirth is relatively unusual within western culture at the present time, space is often written about in reference to women's rituals, particularly in terms of them being held in a "safe space" and often taking place at home or outside rather than in a church building (Berry, 2009, p. 18). However, there are two other elements of the discourse surrounding women's use of space that I would like to focus on in relation to my interview data.

The first goes back to one of Bell's (1992) points that one of the functions of ritual is to negotiate power relations. This is an important point to recognise in relation to childbirth whether women birth in hospital or at home, as Adrienne Rich observed: "One does not give birth in a void, but rather in a cultural and political context. Laws, professional codes, religious sanctions, and ethnic traditions all affect a woman's choices concerning childbirth" in England and Horowitz (1998, p. 82).

This was certainly a feature, sometimes implicitly and other times explicitly, of a number of the women's ritualised activities surrounding birth. Monica for example explained that she created a birth box because she was concerned about losing an element of control when she went into hospital. Her birth box was not just about decorating the space with familiar items. It was filled with things that would soften the harshness of the sterile, medicalised nature of the hospital environment, and potentially empower her to assert herself in the face of "the power of the medical fraternity" (Aldcroft, 1993, p. 181).

Similarly, Elaine describes turning her back on her “antiseptic surroundings” to show her daughter the beauty of the world through the hospital window. Although not all the women verbalised this as explicitly, I think that Maria’s harmonizing candle, Janet’s biblical reading and Jackie’s singing were all attempts to reclaim or reinterpret the space.

Whilst Ali similarly put together a “kit” to take into hospital for her first labour, she and Ruth however seem to have gained knowledge and confidence from their previous experiences and became more assertive about what they wanted on subsequent occasions. Both for example made arrangements to birth at home, in their own space, and paid for a doula to be present. They also described writing very detailed birth plans in the hope of making their intentions clear. Ali said:

I’d detailed at great length you know in my birth plan, the midwives, I’d made a space for them with a kettle and some biscuits ... I was very prescriptive of what I expected of them in my space [home] (Interview, 19 November 2010).

The women’s space making around birth, both implicitly and explicitly were attempts to negotiate the power relations that currently exist, whether in hospital or at home, in terms of legal requirements or medical authority. The women used people, artefacts and music to help them create more personalized spaces both for themselves but also as a signal to the medical staff that they wanted to be treated as an individual rather than just another patient, or indeed the vehicle for a baby.

In this, they also mirrored another characteristic of women’s ritual, highlighted by Northup (1993), who suggests that feminist spirituality is horizontally rather than vertically orientated. This is usually reflected within rituals by the circular form, such as the women making or casting a circle rather than sitting in rows and a focus on relationality and mutuality, rather than worshiping a transcendent God ‘up there’.

In this context however, the women’s creation of space and particularly Ruth, Ali and Jackie’s employment of a doula subverts the usual power dynamics, where a labouring woman is expected to acquiesce to the authority of professionalised

medics. Rather, the doula's role is to put the labouring woman at the centre and empower her to birth, not to attempt to do it for her, and to work with the natural rhythms of labour instead of imposing a prescribed set of measurements or average timings. Equally the respect that these three women had for their doulas suggested to me that their relationship was based on mutuality and respect rather than hierarchy.

In relation to the existing literature around women's use of space in ritual, another factor that I want to highlight from the research data is the way in which the women chose personalised words and artefacts with which to surround themselves during labour or to welcome their child. Indeed, perhaps because there are no traditional words or prescribed rituals for a mother at this time in our culture, some of the women I interviewed chose their own.

Jackie's song from her Mother Blessing for example connected the motion of birthing with the power of the ocean, whilst Ali chose to decorate one of her birthing spaces with the bunting from her wedding. Similarly Monica used images that she had found helpful from her birth box to welcome her baby, and Elaine chose to show her daughter the mountains and used her own words of welcome. Even Janet and her husband, who used words from the Bible, did so in their own way, to welcome and name their daughter. In other words, the personalised nature of these ritualised activities also strongly represents the personality and identity of the mother or parents.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that self-identity was a key issue for a number of the women during their transition into motherhood. The loss of freedom as well as their changing role, especially for first time mothers, thus became two of the reasons why they chose to have a Mother Blessing. Indeed, Fischer and Gainer (1993) highlighted the way in which consumer products at a Baby Shower acted to construct and establish a woman's new identity as a mother.

Within the personalised spaces described above, I think there is evidence of a very clear statement of the mother's identity and what is important to her. At a time

when a woman can feel that she has lost some of her previous identity, then perhaps what she chooses to have around her during labour and the way in which she welcomes her baby can actually remind her of her core values and beliefs. Indeed, none of the women mentioned images of power or status with which to surround themselves.

The importance of this activity in relation to maintaining a woman's identity as her motherhood evolves became clearer to me when I read Elizabeth Dodson Gray's book, which was an early attempt by a number of feminists to recognise sacred dimensions within women's experience. Gray suggests the way in which a woman decorates her home or chooses a particular colour can be an outward expression of her spirituality: "Any woman who chooses color to fill a space with its pervasive and mysterious magic is creating space sacred to the feeling tones of that color" (1988, p. 100).

I think Gray's belief that the way we resonate with certain colours or choose particular items reflects not only our own personality but also our connection with the Divine, is helpful. The chapter, entitled 'Women as Creators of Sacred Order' implies that the items that the women chose to decorate their spaces with, had great significance.

In other words, Elaine chose to show her daughter the mountains, not just because that was the view from the window but because they represented something important to her about her connection to the Divine and the world around her, as I will explore in more detail in the following chapter.

Similarly, Ali was very particular about the colours of cloth she chose to decorate her birthing space with. She also chose to encircle the area with bunting from her wedding, which at the very least represented love, and the relationship out of which the child had been born; also perhaps the circle of family and friends who had attended the wedding.

Indeed, in the same book, Young argues that the home can become a place for the construction of identity. She writes:

Home is the site of the construction and reconstruction of one's self. Crucial to that process is the activity of safeguarding the meaningful things in which one sees the stories of one's self embodied, and rituals of remembrance that reiterate those stories (Young, 1997, pp. 163-4).

Whilst not all of the women chose or indeed were able to birth at home, the fact that some chose to take items from their Mother Blessings and artefacts from home with them into hospital reinforces the idea that these choices were significant. I would suggest that the women's ritualised activities around birth helped in the process of maintaining their identity as a woman and constructing their new identity as mothers.

The last point that I want to make is in relation to sacred space. Clearly there are times when the actual place of birth feels anything but sacred. Indeed, my own experience of lying on an operating table after an emergency caesarean would be a case in point.

Some of the women's birthing stories are very different to my own however, and show understandings of what constitutes a sacred space beyond their association with holy buildings. For example, Roberts explains the way in which casting a circle is understood to create "a sacred, liminal space" (1993, p. 140) for those involved in Goddess worship, in a way that echoes other ancient traditions (1993, p. 137).

McDade and Longview emphasise the intention and actions of those involved: "The ritual space was also made sacred by the women themselves. We gathered to worship in a way authentic and liberating to us" (1988, p. 125). Added to this, Berry highlights the way in which "in women's liturgy there is an attention paid to space, colour and arrangement that forms an integral part of the liturgy" (Berry, 2009, p. 18).

In her book, Singer describes the way in which her partner, doula and midwife worked together to hold a safe space for her to birth (2009, p. 73) in a similar way to Roberts' description of the women in Goddess worship casting a circle. A number of the women I interviewed also described decorating the spaces within which they were to birth and welcome their child with the same deliberation that the women in Berry's research arranged the liturgical space.

Lastly, some of the women described being enabled to birth rather than it being done for them, in a way that was at times frightening and overwhelming but also authentic and liberating. To my mind, these birth spaces do become sacred for those who are present, a sentiment reflected by Grimes' reflections after sharing in his wife's birthing experiences:

With few exceptions, birth space and ritual space are imagined as opposites ... In Susan's story, both [of the spaces where she gave birth] are made special by what transpires in them ... birth thickened ordinary acts into liturgical gestures, charged nearby objects until they vibrated like icons ... Ordinary spaces became pregnant with meaning. So this birth, like the one two years before, became sacred, holy (2000, p. 69).

In summary, it is easy to dismiss customs surrounding the seclusion of women around the time of childbirth and it is equally possible to dismiss more contemporary attempts as a little old fashioned or insignificant. However, using examples from my interview data and relating them to some existing theories about women's use of space in ritual, I think it is possible to see the women's actions in a different light.

During labour the women created spaces around themselves to empower them in birthing but also to help them negotiate existing power relationships within the medical establishment. The use of doulas further enabled the women to challenge existing hierarchies and in turn create relationships built upon mutual respect, with the birthing mother at the centre of care. I also believe that the women's space making helped them to maintain and establish their old and emerging identities

during a particularly challenging time. Bearing these points in mind, I would argue, that rather than insignificant actions, some of the spaces created by the women reflected sacred spaces created by other women's ritualizing.

6.4 Remembering & Emerging Rituals: Ritual Activities Beyond Birth

This section relates to the table shown in Appendix 4.

6.4.1 Background to Ritual Activities Beyond Birth

At the end of the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), we are told that after more than two weeks of being in his cocoon, the caterpillar nibbles a hole and pushes his way out before revealing himself at last as a beautiful butterfly. In short, rather than bursting out, his transformation is gradual and takes time and effort.

Similarly, in Jemma's adaptation of the story in which she imagines herself as the butterfly, Jemma uses the caterpillar's transformation as a metaphor to describe something she is aiming for rather than something she has already achieved, six months after the birth of her second child. Thus, Jemma saw her transformation into motherhood in terms of months and years rather than hours or days.

In chapter 4 I mentioned the tension that currently exists within our culture between the reality for many women and society's unrealistic expectation that it is possible to Bounce Back quickly after childbirth. This was not only reflected within the research data in terms of the women's experience, but also in relation to the timing of some of their later ritualizing, which is the focus of this third and final section.

Indeed, whilst Jemma's marked moment occurred six months after her second birthing experience, Ali and Edna mentioned significant moments for them twelve months later and Elaine talked of a homemade ritual which she repeated every year until her daughter left home at the age of eighteen. In other words, rather than motherhood simply being something that occurs instantly or indeed naturally as a

result of having a baby, the timing of these rituals reinforces the concept that the women I interviewed experienced motherhood as a constantly evolving process.

Another important and related feature of the women's ritualizing during this time is that it often occurred within another event. So Jemma's speech was part of her daughter's Naming Ceremony, just as Ali mentioned significant moments for her during the homemade ritual that she had created to welcome all three of her children, on her youngest son's first birthday.

However, I will go on to argue that rather than making the women's ritualizing beyond birth less significant, there are a range of factors that make it harder for women to ritualize their experiences during this time. Indeed, in which ever way it was done I believe the ritualizing I will explore within this section can all be seen as important attempts by the women to reflect upon their journey.

From my research data I have gathered together two homemade rituals created by Edna and Miranda that focus specifically on their own needs, alongside a third that Elaine devised for herself and her daughter which they then repeated annually. I will also explore Jemma's marked moment and Ali's remembered moments that occurred within other events. Lastly, in addition to her homemade ritual Miranda mentioned a sequence of ritual activities, as did Janet, which I have categorised as remembered moments.

Within the title of this section I have included the word 'emerging' to emphasise the slow process that I think occurs for women after childbirth, both in terms of recovery and in relation to the evolution of their role as mother. 'Remembering' refers to the important process of recalling and finding a way to express a woman's birthing story which I think plays a critical role in enabling and empowering women through their transition into motherhood.

6.4.2 The Difficulties of Telling Birthing Stories

Whilst birthing stories have an important part to play in a woman's transition into motherhood, I have to acknowledge that although the theme of story was strong

within my data, a number of the women expressed reservations about the idea of sharing birthing stories.

Indeed, the only person to speak publicly about her experience was Jemma, and that was partly due to my encouragement. In one of our early conversations to plan her daughter's Naming Ceremony, she said: "I think people don't really want to hear birth stories ... 'cos you know, people will go, yeah, yeah, here we go!" and later she went on to say "and some part of me doesn't really want to share it because it's so private and it's ours" (Interview, 25 May 2007).

This sentiment was also echoed by Elaine in her interview, when she talked about the intimacy of birthing stories, adding: "I think that nobody would be interested" (Interview, 2 November 2010) and Edna who said that she felt that her experience was "too painful to share with anybody" (Interview, 19 November 2010). So, the reluctance expressed by the women centred around the belief that nobody would be interested in hearing their stories and also the feeling that they were too private to share and in some cases, too painful.

Yet my interview data is ambiguous on this point. Having said that her experience was too painful to share with anybody Edna, along with all of the other women shared a great deal of their birthing stories, often in very intimate detail, within the context of the interview setting. Indeed, in my experience of pastoral visiting as a minister, I also heard a number of very detailed accounts of women's birthing experiences. This is a view also shared by Aldcroft, who writes:

It is fairly well known that most women remember almost every intimate detail of their labours and births if anyone troubles to ask them. The experience appears to behave like suppressed material, unfinished business, endlessly reasserting itself with emotional vividness (1993, p. 188).

Further to this, a number of the women I interviewed said that although they had chosen to privately mark elements of the postnatal phase of their journey, they would have appreciated some kind of wider public acknowledgment. Remembering how she felt after arriving home from hospital, Ali recalled:

I'd love it if there was a more accepted way ... the main feeling that day when I got home was that there wasn't someone to mark it for me. I feel like I had had to do an enormous amount ... and I was actually a bit tired now (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Similarly, reflecting on the private nature of her homemade ritual and in response to my initial questionnaire, Edna wrote:

I had a real sense of needing to mark the end of breastfeeding – I would have liked to have done something that was recognised and accepted by others. I was so proud of what I had achieved and wanted to celebrate that (Personal communication, 15 March 2010).

It could of course be argued that the women I interviewed had a particular interest in doing rituals, but based on her experience of working with parents from a wide variety of different backgrounds in the US, Pam England states that:

New mothers have confided in me how they long to be ceremonially or publicly recognized by other mothers and friends for what they have accomplished and become (1998, p. p265).

So, for some of the women I interviewed there was a clear tension between feeling hesitant about sharing their birthing story and needing to, alongside wanting to mark particular moments in their own journey and craving some sort of more public acknowledgment. Whilst I accept that this may not be the case for all women who become mothers, I want to mention some of the possible reasons for this tension that emerged from my interview data, before going on to highlight some of the potential benefits for women of having a space to share their stories and acknowledge their journey.

The first point goes back to Ali's comment that having laboured and birthed her child, she felt tired and was ready for someone else to mark the event for her, by which I think she meant that she did not feel that she had the energy to create and organise an event alongside everything else. Indeed, the reality of looking after a new born baby or one or more small children does not provide much time for

thinking, let alone reflecting or being creative. As in Ali's experience, the early days of motherhood for many women are dominated by tiredness.

Similarly, although in my experience elements of women's birthing stories often do get told, this usually takes place in an environment that is not conducive to either talking at length or being truly listened to. My memory of the early days of motherhood is that whilst I did meet up with other mothers regularly, our conversations were characterized by broken sentences and half told stories, in the midst of attending to the practical needs of the infants we had in tow.

So the practical constraints in the postnatal period is an obvious reason why particular milestones on a woman's journey into motherhood during this phase often go unmarked and their birthing stories untold, or only ever shared in fragments. There is also our cultural tendency, mentioned previously, to focus on a new baby rather than the mother.

After asking what the theme of my research was, a friend recently told me of her experience of family members coming round to the house to admire the new baby. She described feeling like a stranger in her own house, and having made them all tea and coffee, retreating upstairs, on her own, in tears. Within a culture where the focus is so much on the new born baby rather than the mother, I would argue that it is understandable why women often feel disinclined to suggest an event in which they are the focus rather than the child.

Another factor that emerged from my data is the lack of literature reflecting women's experience of motherhood or childbirth. Miranda recalled that during her first pregnancy: "I wanted to read poetry, I wanted to read fiction, I wanted to read drama and there just wasn't very much about the mother's experience" (Interview, 6 March 2012). Similarly, Ruth said that she had searched for something to read that connected her childbirth and early motherhood experience with her faith but she couldn't find anything, until some years later when she came across Hebblethwaite's *Motherhood and God*, (1984).

Indeed, Christ makes the point that:

Women live in a world where women's stories rarely have been told from their own perspective ... Of course women appear in the stories of men, but only in roles defined by men ... Women have lived in the interstices between their own vaguely understood experience and the shapings given by the stories of men (1995, p. 4).

Christ goes on to use the example of Martha in Doris Lessing's novel *Martha Quest* (2001) who recognizes that she has no role model for a positive self-image. Christ suggests that women seek images of real women within literature not only to help them "shape their identities" but also to enable them to "chart their [own] experiences" (1995, p. 55).

It could of course be argued that reading in this way is a very middle class pursuit and Miranda and Ruth's search for literature is not at all reflective of society in general. It is also true that much has changed in recent years. The number of women authors writing from their own experience for example continues to increase, and a much more realistic portrayal of childbirth has become popularised through books such as *Call the Midwife* (Worth, 2002) and its related television series.

Similarly, the Channel 4 series *One Born Every Minute* which follows real life women through their labour and birthing experiences in hospitals up and down the country has transformed some of the mysteries of the labour ward into regular midweek viewing. The increased use of the internet has also seen the growth of popular online forums such as Mumsnet, where women can share their stories and concerns in relative anonymity. However, I would argue that these changes are relatively new and that it takes time for ideas to disseminate and culture to change.

The final factor that emerged from my interview data which I believe is a contributory factor to the tensions surrounding the telling of birthing stories is the role of the church. Although in many cases local churches seem to welcome families and thus by association, pregnant women and new mums, it was not a place that a

number of the women I interviewed spoke of positively in relation to this phase of their lives.

Edna for example made the comment that “childbirth is a hush-hush experience in the church” (Personal communication, 15 March 2010) and Elaine wrote that, “The church offered nothing that spoke to me at the time” (Personal communication 11 March 2009). Similarly, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, Ruth described having “a great big baptism” for her first child in which she described feeling that there was nothing in it that connected with her experience, at a time when she felt to have been “stripped” of her old role and was facing the prospect of building a new life (Interview, 10 May 2010).

These stories reflect a disconnection between the women’s lived experience and the church’s liturgy and culture. In her article published in 1993, Aldcroft suggests a number of reasons why childbirth and motherhood have been such neglected dimensions of the church’s liturgy and pastoral care. She includes factors such as the historical male domination of the clergy (p. 183) alongside the church’s tendency to equate goodness with order, discipline, and control (p. 186).

Although change has taken place since then, including the impact of the ordination of women priests in the Anglican church in this country in 1992, the legacy of male domination along with the lingering memory of old teachings regarding the inferiority of women and the impurity of menstruation and childbirth (Douglas, M., 2002; Herbert, Johnson, Korte, & De Troyer, 2003) continue to have a lasting effect. For example, my sense is that many of the churches that I have been part of would be more comfortable singing a hymn about crucifixion than hearing a sermon on childbirth.

In fact, I think that there are many reasons for the tensions that women feel between the need to find expression for their birthing story and the sense that nobody really wants to hear them; the desire to have some acknowledgment of what they have been through and the knowledge that there is no socially recognised way of marking it. I have made some suggestions based on the themes

that arose from my interview data, but next I want to focus on some of the potential advantages for women of having a forum where birthing stories can be shared.

6.4.3 The Potential Benefits of Telling Birthing Stories

In the previous section I referred to Aldcroft's (1993) suggestion that if a woman's birthing experience is suppressed there is a tendency for it to keep reasserting itself after the event. In chapter 4 I also referred to her suggestion, that the consequences of an overly medicalized experience can have long term effects on a woman's self-esteem (1993, p. 182).

Within my own data, Miranda recalled the way in which a Chinese acupuncturist had encouraged her to name each of the children that she had lost through miscarriage and "envision them". Miranda explained to me that this advice had been incredibly helpful to her and had stood out at the time, in stark contrast to "the messages I got from lots of people [which] was just to minimise, minimise" (Interview, 6 March 2012).

Following the acupuncturist's advice, Miranda described walking along a beach one day and envisioning each of her children, naming them and then building a "little altar with stones for each of their lives". Although this must have been incredibly painful, Miranda went on to explain the way in which this homemade ritual along with other remembered moments such as going for counselling and massage helped her to process her grief and, in time, move on. She said: "the rituals ... the thing that's important about those, is that I remember them, but a lot of the other stuff I don't remember ... it puts down markers along the way".

So, although Miranda was describing her experience of miscarriage rather than childbirth, the ability to express what she had been through enabled her to leave behind many of the painful details and remember instead the ritual and actions she had taken to work through her grief. In a similar way, I would suggest being able to

work through a particularly medicalized birthing experience could help women to move on, rather than experience recurring reminders.

Another scenario in which I believe the telling of birthing stories could be beneficial is in helping women to establish more realistic expectations of motherhood in contrast to the images and narratives of perfection that abound in the media. This issue is of particular importance in relation to postnatal depression (PND). Cox, who developed a widely used scale to help in the diagnosis of PND suggests that whilst the reasons behind its cause are complicated, women who suffer from it are universally “troubled by their inability to live up to their own high expectations of motherhood” (1982, p. 114).

As I suggested in chapter 4, I believe that society’s idealization of motherhood has a direct impact on individual women’s perception of the role. I would argue that the ability to share stories and experiences in a safe and supportive environment could help women to recognise and challenge some of these ideals.

Although none of the women described sharing their birthing stories in this way, the experience of being enabled to hear each other into speech described by Morton (1985) could also be empowering in the context of birthing. In reference to the context that Morton originally described, Christ writes:

Her phrase captures the dynamic in which the presence of other women who have had similar experiences makes it possible for women to say things they have never said before, to think thoughts they would have suppressed ... new stories are born and women who hear and tell their stories are inspired to create new life possibilities for themselves and all women (1995, p. 7).

Indeed, to a certain extent, this was my experience. During the interview process there were often such strong resonances between my own birthing and elements of each of the women’s stories that sometimes it was only after several attempts at rereading the interview transcripts that other themes became visible to me. So, as well as forming the basis for this thesis, listening to the stories of the women I

interviewed has also helped me at a personal level to reflect on my experience, work through it and find expression for my own story.

This process leads me to think that alongside helping women who have had particularly difficult birthing experiences and potentially enabling others to avoid or perhaps minimise the damaging repercussions of PND, the importance of finding a way to express your birthing story should be advocated amongst all women who become mothers. Indeed, Alison Fenton (2012) argues that because PND often goes unrecognised, a church liturgy that enables a woman to express her birthing experience should be offered universally.

6.4.4 Different Expressions of Birthing Stories

In the previous two sections I have highlighted some of the tensions that exist around the public expression of birthing stories, as well as suggesting some of the possible benefits for women who become mothers of finding ways to reflect upon their experience. In advocating this I am mindful of the fact that since the demise of the Rite of Churching other researchers have also sought to find an alternative liturgy that could enable the church to cater for the pastoral needs of women around this time.

Amongst them, Natalie Watson in her exploration of a new feminist sacramental ecclesiology (2002), calls for a reconsideration of the praxis of sacramental initiation which acknowledges both the new life of the infant as well as the life changing experiences of the mother. Indeed, Watson suggests that a revised rite of Christian initiation should seek to combine the baptism of a child with an acknowledgment of the experiences of the mother, as well as other significant adults whose lives and roles have been affected by the birth.

She also emphasises the importance of any new rite being performed by the whole of the Christian community of which the mother and child are an integral part, rather than a ceremony being done *to* someone by an ordained member of the

clergy. Following along the lines of Ruether's *Women-Church* (1985), Watson goes on to suggest that a mother:

should be regarded as giving herself and her experiences to the whole community to be recognized as not only her private experiences which need to be covered up, but as a political experience which takes place in the political and social context of the whole community by which it is, after all, shaped (2002, p. 86).

I find this vision personally inspiring, although I also have to acknowledge that more than ten years after her book was published, such a ritual remains way beyond the practice or aspirations of many churches and was certainly not within the experiences of any of the women I interviewed.

Someone else who has done work in this area and made alternative suggestions to the Rite of Churching is Thelma Aldcroft, whose article I have already mentioned. Like Watson, Aldcroft talks about the importance of mutuality and draws on her experience of a Women in Theology²¹ group in which a supportive, healing space was sometimes created. Aldcroft writes:

It was unlike traditional healing services within the Church, when wounds are nursed in silent privacy, then taken to the priest or minister at the altar rail for God's healing. In our women's circles we share our pain, reflect upon it, laugh and cry together, and possibly anoint each other (1993, p. 188).

Thus, Aldcroft imagines a supportive framework like those mentioned by Morton and Christ in which women could be given the space, shortly after childbirth, to talk about their experience and share their joy or pain before moving on to a time of thanksgiving. Like Watson she also acknowledges the cultural tensions surrounding the public retelling of birthing stories, whilst also adding that being able to

²¹ Women in Theology began in 1984 as an Anglican, London based movement, with the aim of encouraging the theological education of women in preparation for the time when the Anglican Church would ordain them as priests. The movement quickly grew with groups across the country (Daggers, 2002).

articulate them favours the middle class with their “elaborated” code of speech (1993, p. 183).

The ritualizing that I have gathered under this heading is very different from the suggested alternatives to the Rite of Churching put forward by Watson and Aldcroft. It also differs from the work of Hassall (2009) and Fenton (2012) who have both sought to revise and thus to a certain extent revive the old liturgy. Instead, the homemade rituals described by the women I interviewed all evolved out of very personal experiences and can be seen as an effort to address particular issues. I think they are relevant to these other attempts to find an alternative to the Rite of Churching partly because of some of these differences.

Firstly, each of them took place within the existing culture and thus found ways to overcome the tensions surrounding the retelling of birthing stories that I mentioned earlier. Miranda and Edna for example conducted their rituals alone. Elaine’s homemade ritual was also very private only involving herself and her daughter. Jemma was the only one to speak publicly and although she did not mention any details of her actual birthing story, she did share experiences of her transition into motherhood through her retelling of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969).

By using this well-known children’s story as a framework Jemma was able to share some very difficult aspects of her experience, such as depression, issues around identity and body image, as well as tensions with her partner in a humorous way that did not dampen the mood of the gathering or appear to claim the limelight at an event that had been billed as her daughter’s Naming Ceremony. Her style also made the story palatable to a wide audience, as the event was attended by friends and family of both genders and all ages.

Although the environment of the event was not conducive to the same level of listening or indeed mutual sharing that both Watson and Aldcroft advocate, I think that Jemma’s public expression of her experience was still important. Rather than having words spoken *about* her or *to* her for example, Jemma had had to do a fair amount of reflective work on her own experience before the event, to produce the

story and spoke the words herself. Through using humour, Jemma also made it possible for her story to be shared with a wide audience.

The issue of who should attend such a gathering is both important and divisive. Whilst Aldcroft suggests that a gathered congregation of women only may be necessary for example, Hassall writes that from a personal point of view the thought of being in a women only gathering “fills me with dread” (2009, p. 51).

Also in favour of both genders being present, Knödel²² emphasizes that the communal aspect of a postnatal ceremony is important because it helps to emphasise support for the mother, whilst at the same time enabling everyone to learn from her experience. In fact, Hassall suggests that if a liturgy is to be developed that is to be widely useful within Anglican circles then it needs to be appropriate for public worship which is open to all.

At the present time, I personally find it difficult to imagine a postnatal ceremony that can be both helpful to a mother and open to anyone. However, I do recognise that Jemma’s use of humour, used in a similar way to the Psalms within the traditional Rite of Churching, enables a woman to find public expression of some very difficult experiences and emotions. Indeed, rather than devising a single liturgy to be used within a church context I think it would be preferable for a range of resources to be available to women who become mothers, that can be chosen and adapted to suit diverse situations.

A very different expression of her story for example was described by Edna. After a difficult first year of motherhood, complicated by both herself and her daughter suffering from health problems, Edna decided to finish breastfeeding around the time of her daughter’s first birthday, and mark it. She explained: “I wanted to do something so desperately but it was connected in with it being the end of the first

²² As previously mentioned, Knödel (1997) is the same author as Watson (2002).

year and this year in which *everything* had changed. In which the person I was had changed" (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Edna bought a little bottle of champagne and a box of chocolates and sat down one evening after she had put her daughter to bed with the intention of reflecting on her experiences over the past year:

I can still picture the blue sky and the sycamore tree and just sitting and being silent and just kind of holding that ... pain I suppose ... The significance of what had happened in that year and all the contradictory feelings of happiness at having [her daughter] and loving her and being proud of myself for getting through it, but I suppose almost like a grief for what I'd lost in the process and what I'd given up.

Although by conducting her homemade ritual in private Edna did not get any communal support, I think her situation reflects the reality that for many women there simply isn't a group of people with whom they can imagine sharing such intimate experiences. Rather than the occasion going unmarked and ignoring how she felt, Edna used privacy in a similar way to Jemma's use of humour, to enable her to find expression for her story.

Another interesting feature of Edna's homemade ritual is that she also bought a small bottle of champagne and chocolates for each of the friends who she had met at the breastfeeding café that she had attended over the past year. Although Edna did this to coincide with their children's first birthdays I think that her gift also represented something much deeper. Although some of the group had moved away from the area, they were all women who were going through their own rite of passage at the same time as Edna, and with whom she described feeling a connection. Although there was no communal aspect to Edna's ritual in the way that has been previously described, there is a sense that through the giving of gifts Edna is accompanied in her ritual by a community of women.

I also want to highlight the fact that Edna chose to hold her ritual a year after her birthing experience, because the time of year or the culmination of a particular

phase, such as the end of breastfeeding was a common theme across a number of the women's stories. Jemma's daughter's Naming Ceremony in which she did her speech for example, was timed to coincide with six months after her birthing and the end of breastfeeding.

Similarly, the same point in the year was also a feature of Ali and Elaine's ritualizing because they coincided with a child's first birthday. Miranda also explained that "for a while I would become incredibly sad and depressed at certain times of the year and then I would remember that that was when a baby was due" (Interview, 6 March 2012).

So, whilst the anniversary of a birthing is popularly celebrated by a birthday, the date, the month and the season was spoken about as a resonant time of year by a number of the women. In fact, eighteen years on and remembering her time on retreat whilst she was pregnant and sitting in a garden full of ripe vegetables, Janet commented: "It's still important. I'm growing lots of vegetables at the moment. I like being reminded of that connection" (Personal communication, 6 July 2010).

Having become aware of these resonances from my own experience and as a result of this research I have also started to try to mark the anniversary of some of my friend's birthings by giving them a bunch of flowers. This custom has since become reciprocal between us, so I know that in the midst of preparations for my own children's birthday parties, how lovely it is to receive a gift from someone who has remembered that it is also the anniversary of my birthing; a significant day in my life as well as that of my children's.

The final homemade ritual that I want to explore under this heading was also private in nature and was instigated by Elaine, with her daughter, on every birthing-day until her daughter left home. Elaine described cuddling up in bed together when her daughter was small and snuggling on the settee when she was older with her birthing journal laid open on her lap, which she would read aloud rather like reading a storybook. Elaine explained:

That setting really embodied what the story was about ... the choice to have a child who then I was so overcome with ... it took my breath away, so in a way my arm was the way of saying, 'You are beloved! You are loved! This is your story of how you came into the world' (Interview, 2 November 2010).

This was important to Elaine because she had chosen to have a child in the knowledge that her daughter would grow up without knowing her father. During the interview she described her belief in the power of giving someone their story so that they have firm foundations from which to grow into their own potential. Making sure that her daughter knew that she was a choice and was loved was important to Elaine, but so was the knowledge that someone would know her own story: "I wanted somebody to know my story ... our stories really are so constitutive of our identity and of being known."

Again, Elaine's ritual emphasises the individual nature of all of the women's ritualizing. Elaine created her birth-ing-day homemade ritual partly because she had no partner to share her experience or tell her own story to and because she wanted her daughter to know that she was wanted. Although the retelling of the story was not public it contained very intimate details of Elaine's birthing experience and was the only story to be repeated.

I do not know what the effect on her daughter has been of this retelling, but it was obvious from the interview that the ritual evoked fond memories for Elaine. It was also clear that it was important to her that her daughter knew the details of her story. I would also suggest that in its retelling, the story no doubt played a role in helping Elaine to build and establish her new identity in her role as a mother. Perhaps it will also help Elaine's daughter to consider the retelling of birth stories to be a natural part of living rather than a taboo subject.

In conclusion, although slightly fewer of the women I interviewed talked about ritualizing and mentioned fewer activities in relation to this period of their transition into motherhood, I have argued that a number of factors make it more difficult for women who have recently become mothers to create rituals that focus

on themselves during this time. Indeed, I would argue that the ritualizing mentioned by the women did play an important role in enabling them to reflect upon and work through their experience and subsequent transition.

I would also suggest that the nature of their ritualizing makes an important contribution to the debate surrounding the re-establishment or re-visioning of the Rite of Churching. Firstly, the privacy and use of humour enabled some of the women to find expression for their stories which can be seen as a step towards the communal learning and sharing envisioned by Watson and Aldcroft.

Secondly, the diversity of the women's experiences and ritualizing serve as a reminder that no journey into motherhood is the same. Rather than trying to establish a single liturgy to be used within a church setting, I think that the diverse and creative ideas gathered within this section suggest that no single solution is possible. Rather, these ideas can be understood as a contribution to existing suggested liturgies (Hassall, 2009; Fenton, 2012) and ideas (Aldcroft, 1993; Watson, 2002) which enable those who are seeking to support new mothers or for women transitioning into motherhood themselves, to have a choice, so that they can go on to create personalised rituals that are relevant to their own experience and faith context.

6.5 Conclusion

Within this chapter I have explored the ritualizing that the women described to me under three headings and highlighted three very different features that emerged from each. In relation to the themes of performative actions or utterances, story and space I have also sought to draw upon existing theory, particularly when they have been recognised by other researchers as important features of wider women's ritualizing.

In conclusion, the fact that each of the women's experiences of birthing were different and their ritualizing diverse emphasises two important points. The first is that birthing is an important experience within many women's lives that is not only

worthy of marking, but also rich with potential for future insight and growth. The second is that the church, or others seeking to offer pastoral care and support to women who are transitioning into motherhood should be aware that a single ceremony before or after the event will not suffice. Rather, women need a range of resources touching on aspects of the whole journey into motherhood which can be chosen and adapted to suit individual contexts.

CHAPTER 7: PATTERNS WITHIN WOMEN'S
SPIRITUALITY

Early Motherhood

In Matthew's gospel, when Jesus was still young, his parents were forced to make another journey into the unknown, when they evaded the wrath of King Herod and escaped into Egypt.

The story has obvious parallels with current issues of migration, with people making perilous journeys away from their homeland in fear of their lives.

Parallels can also be drawn between these journeys into the unknown and a woman's experience of early motherhood.

After childbirth, another phase of her transition dawns with entirely different challenges to those of pregnancy or labour. Alongside the all-consuming physical demands of eating and sleeping there is the question of how a woman reintegrates back into society in her new role as a mother.

Not only has the landscape changed, but the woman herself has been altered by her experience, just as Mary's journey into Egypt would have challenged her resilience, affected her relationships and given her a new perspective on the world.

7.1 Introduction

Christianity, in line with other major religious and philosophical traditions has understood conflict and suffering as important times in an individual's life for personal transformation and religious conversion (Coward, 1989).²³ When understood as a rite of passage in which transitional crises and emotional experiences combine, a woman's journey into motherhood can be understood in the same way, and yet their stories are largely missing from Biblical accounts and Christian liturgy (Aldcroft, 1993).

Similarly, cross-culturally and throughout history pregnancy and childbirth have been perceived to be spiritual events because of the miraculous process involved (Moloney, 2007; Gross, 1980). However, very little exists within Christian theological literature on the subject (Strack, 2005) and previous research has suggested that women within the Christian and Jewish faiths do not always associate their experiences of childbirth with spirituality (Fenton, 2008; Sered, 1991).

All that being said, the theme of women's spirituality has recently been explored by an increasingly wide range of disciplines within the field of healthcare science (Callister, 2010) and the importance and role of a woman's spirituality during childbirth and her transition into motherhood has also been recognised (Athan & Miller, 2005; Callister, 2010; Hall, 2001; Jesse, Schoeboom, & Blanchard, 2007).

In this chapter I begin by surveying the literature that has emerged on the theme of spirituality out of the field of midwifery and related disciplines and explain some of the reasons why women within the Christian tradition may not see a connection between spirituality and their experience of childbirth. I then move on to establish a definition of spirituality before exploring my own research data on the subject. To do this, I have chosen to use a three stage model introduced by Nicola Sree (2004)

²³ Examples from the Bible include Job, Hosea and Paul.

to examine the ways in which the spirituality of the women I interviewed was affected during their experience of childbirth and transition into motherhood.

The chapter concludes with a theological reflection exploring the church's sacrament of baptism alongside an experience of childbirth. This forms the basis for a short section in which I explore some ideas that lie beyond what my data specifically says but to where I sense it points regarding the sacred nature of birthing.

7.2 Perceptions of Spirituality within a Woman's Transition into Motherhood from a Healthcare Perspective

In 1975, an American midwife, Ina May Gaskin first published a book entitled *Spiritual Midwifery* (2002). Now in its fourth edition it has become a classic text amongst advocates of natural birthing and is based on her work on The Farm, an intentional community that she helped to form during the height of the peace-train movements of the 1970s. With staggeringly low rates of medical intervention²⁴ and a reputation for excellent health care outcomes for the mothers and babies in their care, Gaskin's ethos is based on her belief in the natural birth process and the role that a woman's spirituality plays within it.

Since the first publication of Gaskin's book the theme of spirituality has emerged across a broad range of healthcare literature. In relation to motherhood, an ethnographic study focused on the sacred dimensions of pregnancy and birth (Balin, 1988) whilst Susan Starr Sered (1991) asked Jewish women on a maternity ward in a Jerusalem hospital whether they believed that childbirth was a religious or spiritual experience.

²⁴ According to an official parliamentary report "There is a general consensus amongst clinicians that a high CS [caesarean section] rate is undesirable." (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2002, p. 4) According to the same report, in the 1950s, 3% of births in England were by CS. By the early 1980s this had risen to 10% (2002, p. 1) In NHS hospitals between 2013-14 the CS rate had increased to 26.2% (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015) By comparison, between 1970 and 2000 based on 2,028 pregnancies, The Farm midwives had a caesarean rate of 1.4% (Gaskin, 2002, p. 468).

Within the literature there have been studies with a very specific focus, such as amongst women living with HIV/AIDS who believed that God would protect their children from becoming infected (Polzer Casarez & Miles, 2008), and spiritual issues arising from experiences of perinatal bereavement (Cunningham, 1997). Research has also been conducted amongst specific faith groups such as Sered's study amongst Jewish women mentioned above (1991), the effects of Islam and traditional practices on Turkish women's reproductive health (Bahar, et al., 2005) as well as research amongst Mormon women (Ashurst-McGee, 1997).

Across the literature, spirituality is defined in a variety of different ways, from spirituality as religion (Ashurst-McGee, 1997) to spirituality as a way to describe the relationship that exists between childbearing women and their unborn child (Hall, 2006). There is also a recognition that religiosity may be distinct from a woman's spirituality and that her spirituality may not be formalised (Crowther & Hall, 2015).

So, within healthcare professions responsible for the care of women during this time there has been a growing recognition in recent years of the transition into motherhood as an opportunity for creative spiritual growth and transformation in women (Athan & Miller, 2005; Molina, 2013; Schneider, 2012) as well as an understanding of childbirth as sacred (Fahy & Hastie, 2008; Gaskin, 2002; Crowther, 2013). Religious belief and spirituality have been identified to have a positive impact on levels of anxiety in pregnancy (Mann, McKeown, Bacon, Vesselinov, & Bush, 2008) and spiritual practices, such as Mindfulness and Yoga have been shown to improve a woman's experience of childbirth (Parrat, 2008). Courses aimed at teaching spirituality to midwives have also been developed (Mitchell & Hall, 2007).

It is also interesting, and pertinent to this study to note however that concerns have been raised within the literature that spirituality is considered to be a difficult topic and therefore often gets overlooked (Crowther & Hall, 2015), or dominated by medical procedures (Davis-Floyd, 2003). There is also an awareness that when a woman's journey into motherhood occurs against a cultural backdrop that does not recognise ambivalence as a defining feature of this transitional process, nor

honours mothering as a time of spiritual crisis and transformation, women navigate their passage unassisted leading to a higher risk of dysfunction, such as depression (Athan & Miller, 2005; Parker, 1995). As Molina writes, from a psychotherapist's viewpoint:

There is a real potential for deep spiritual transformation in motherhood, even as we must also recognize the potential for stagnation, depression and giving up. Deeper research into these dual spiritual dynamics and more discussion of the conceptualization of spirituality in the context [of] motherhood will assist women on the journey into motherhood (2013, p. 220).

7.3 Perceptions of Spirituality within a Woman's Transition into Motherhood within the Christian Tradition

In contrast to recent health care literature, there has been a distinct lack of research within the Christian tradition on the impact of the transition into motherhood on a woman's spirituality and limited recognition of its importance. An exception to this was a lecture given by Hanna Strack (2005) in which she introduces some ideas towards a theology of childbirth, based on six interviews that she conducted with practising midwives. The only other exception that I am aware of is research that Alison Fenton (2008) did for her MA dissertation.

Fenton's study involved 34 Church of England women whom she asked, through a questionnaire, whether they had experienced giving birth as an encounter with God, in which, over half of the respondents thought that there was no spiritual dimension to childbirth (2008, p. 14). In trying to explain why this was the case, Fenton refers to Sered's study with Jewish mothers, who observed that the women in her study often lacked a means of articulating an event which encompasses both the physical and the spiritual (1991). This observation also resonates with the findings of Susan Crowther whose research from a healthcare perspective suggests that although the women in her study experienced birth as spiritually powerful, this belief was easily ignored or turned away from (Crowther & Hall, 2015).

Based on her research into women's spirituality, Joann Wolski Conn suggests that the perceptions women have of themselves and of God often lead them not to expect to encounter God in their lives or, when they do, to denigrate those experiences and fail to honour them with confident self-understanding (1996, p. 12). Whilst feminist writers on spirituality have sought to redress this (Schneiders, 1996; Christ & Plaskow, 1992) the belief that the messy business of childbirth and the mundane tasks of early motherhood cannot possibly be spiritual clearly persists for many women and evolves from an often implicit separation in Church teaching of the physical from the spiritual. As Grace Jantzen writes:

In spite of the widespread recognition that such linkage [of women and sin] is not faithful to scripture and tradition, however, in popular and even scholarly theological thinking it infrequently continues to be closely linked with bodilyness, especially with sexuality, and hence with woman (1998, p. 162).

The dualistic thinking within the teachings of the church fathers, such as Augustine has been well documented by others (Harrison, 2000; Murphy, 2006) as has the impact of their work on understandings of impurity regarding sex, menstruation, childbirth and women within the Christian tradition (Herbert, Johnson, Korte, & De Troyer, 2003; Jantzen, 1998). Feminists have also critiqued the sacrament of baptism as a ritual in which the church has sought to substitute a child's natural birth with a spiritual rebirth, which is less messy, more controlled and side lines a mother's role (Daly, 1986; Gudorf, 1987).

Whilst these threads go some way to explaining why over half of the women in Fenton's study did not believe that there was a spiritual dimension to childbirth, of those who answered positively there was a sense that their experience of childbirth had impacted upon their relationships. In fact, more than half of these women reported feeling closer to God, almost two thirds felt closer to others and almost a quarter felt close to nature (2008, p. 7).

Amongst feminists who have sought to create a new framework through which to make connections between women's experience of life and God, Carter Heyward

(1982) has done much to establish a relational approach to theology. In contrast to alienating notions of God as an oppressive patriarch, Heyward develops the notion of a God who is intimately related to the world.

Nicola Slee (2004) has then drawn on the notion of relationality in her study of women's spirituality and faith development and suggested that amongst her female research participants there was a strong sense of the sacred being found within ordinary life. Slee goes on to suggest that women's spirituality is therefore relational and that women are most likely to encounter God through their relationship with themselves, with others or within creation.

Of the many different experiences that Slee cites, she includes two narratives in which mothering can be seen "as a positive experience of awakening and birthing of the self" (2004, p. 125). In other words, the concept of relationality as developed by feminists such as Carter Heyward, and Slee's application of it, clearly shows that childbirth can play an important role in women's faith development or spiritual journey.

So far, I have shown that there is an increasing awareness of the role that women's spirituality can play during their transition into motherhood within healthcare literature, but that the concept has been largely overlooked or in some instances undermined within theology. Drawing on Fenton and Sered's studies I have shown the effect that this neglect can have on a woman's belief that her experience of childbirth or motherhood has anything to do with her spirituality whilst also highlighting the importance of relationships within some of the women's responses.

I have also drawn on some more contemporary feminist theological literature to introduce the concept that relationality is instrumental in understanding women's spirituality and that the journey into motherhood is a time in a woman's life when many of her relationships are in transition. I will explore the idea of relationality within Slee's threefold model of faith development in greater detail further on, but first I want to establish a definition for spirituality through which to explore my research data.

7.4 Defining Spirituality

There is no single definition of spirituality and as a consequence the word means a wide range of different things to different people. As I mentioned earlier, this is clearly the case within health care literature where spirituality has been used to refer to anything from spirituality as religion to the nature of the relationship between a mother and her unborn child.

In this brief section my intention is not to critique the understanding of others but rather to set out a definition of spirituality that I can then use to explore the ways in which the women I interviewed experienced their transition into motherhood which reflect the patterns of spirituality and faith development in Slee's model. In doing so, I am very conscious of the dangers of appropriating empirical data and imposing a researcher's interpretation on it that may run counter to a participant's own belief or stance.

Whilst all of the women I interviewed had a relationship with the Christian tradition and a feminist awareness, it would be wrong to suggest that a single, clearly defined spirituality was expressed or emerged. It is also important for me to point out that although some of the women spoke about their experiences of childbirth and spirituality with a clear awareness of how it related to patterns that have been recognised within feminist spirituality, in other accounts these connections were not explicitly made by the women themselves. On this point I have therefore had to handle my research data with great care, by making it clear within my thesis when a woman made a particular connection herself and when the inference has been made through my own interpretation.

With this diversity of experience in mind I have chosen to use a fairly broad definition of spirituality to include *the way in which individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way that they experience their connectedness to self*,

*to others, to the world and to God.*²⁵ This definition has proved broad enough to provide a framework within which to explore the ways in which the women's experiences of their transition into motherhood impacted upon their spirituality.

7.5 An Introduction to the Model

Nicola Slee's book was published in 2004 and was based on her research into the patterns and processes of women's spirituality and faith development. Drawing on interviews with thirty women who either thought of themselves as Christian or were on the fringes of the tradition, Slee identified three major generative themes which she suggests reveal core patterns within women's spiritual development; those of alienation, awakening and relationality.

In adopting Slee's three stage model I am reminded of the limitations of van Gennep's theory and want to emphasise again that although I find the simplicity of using a model through which to explore my data useful, it can never tell the whole story. For example, I am not trying to suggest that childbirth or the transition into motherhood acts as a smooth developmental process for those women who are open to the possibility of there being a spiritual dimension to their experience.

Indeed, many feminist writers (Slee, 2004, p. 38) are wary of the use of sequential language arguing that it is too restrictive and cannot adequately encompass the varied patterns of women's spirituality. Mary Grey for example introduces the concept of spiralling (1989, p. 70), Sue Monk Kidd uses the metaphor of birthing (1996, p. 11) Maria Harris likens the experience to a dance in which the steps can incorporate both backwards and forwards movement (1988, p. 14) and Alison Woolley suggests that all of these are too limited, and so uses the metaphor of a spider's web to incorporate a wider range of patterning (2015).

²⁵ I have based this definition on Slee's suggestion that the women in her study talked about their connectedness "to self, other and to God" (2004, p. 140) and on a definition of spirituality that has emerged from the health care world at a Consensus Conference (Puchalski, et al., 2009)

So, although I have used the three headings of alienation, awakening and relationality, they do not reflect a developmental process that any of the women I interviewed started and then went on to complete during their transition into motherhood. Rather, I have used the headings for clarity and in order to explore these three particular themes within my research data. Indeed, some of the women described a feminist awakening occurring at college or university, and thus childbirth and motherhood which occurred some years later can be understood as further experiences within that journey.

Of the three themes, alienation was the most common and was mentioned in one way or another by all of the women. For some, at the time of the interview, this was simply expressed as an experience of alienation through which they felt angered, betrayed or stuck, whilst others went on to describe a moment or process of feminist awakening prompted by their birthing or deepened by their transition into motherhood.

The following exploration is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the spirituality of the transition into motherhood. Instead, it is a contribution, based on my research data, towards the growing understanding we have of the patterns that are emerging from women's spirituality and faith journeys within the Christian feminist theological tradition and an attempt to engage this with the developing interest in the role that women's spirituality can play during her transition into motherhood within the healthcare profession.

7.6 Patterns of Women's Spirituality: Alienation

The first of Slee's themes which resonates with the stories of the women I interviewed is that of alienation, which she describes as an experience of the loss of self and a sense of lacking an authentic connection with others and with God. Slee suggests that the theme of alienation can be found across a broad range of literature including women's fiction (Christ, 1995) poetry (Ostriker, 1987) biography (Heilbrun, 1989) and psychology (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986) and is described in a wide variety of different ways.

Christ for example talks about an “experience of nothingness” (p. 13) and Sue Monk Kidd writes about it as a “deep sleep” (1996, p. 13) whilst the women within Slee’s research group used a range of metaphors to describe their experiences from the language of paralysis to the concept of death.

Although I didn’t specifically invite the women in my research group to think of imagery to describe their journey into motherhood, the experience of alienation was a dominant theme within the narratives and included the women who mentioned that they had experienced some form of feminist awakening previously as well as those who did not talk in those terms. Whilst each woman’s story was very different, three main sources of origin for their sense of alienation emerged; the medical profession, the church and the prevailing culture of motherhood, which again reflects patterns that have been noted by others:

The women’s experiences of impasse are experiences of not fitting or belonging within the boundaries of sanctioned models of identity or religious belief ... The struggle to name the reality of their experiences in a cultural context where such experiences are rendered invisible exacerbates the isolation and powerlessness they feel (Slee, 2004, p. 106).

Some of the women I interviewed talked about a sense of alienation from all three of the sources that I have mentioned whilst others only talked about one. Due to the fact that these themes have also been explored elsewhere in my thesis, and for clarity, I have chosen to focus on one of the women’s stories under each of the headings and thus the examples serve only as illustrations.

7.6.1 An Experience of Alienation Prompted by the Medical Establishment

I had not met Ali before our interview but it quickly became apparent to me that she was someone who tended to move in what are often referred to as ‘alternative’ circles. Indeed, early on in the interview she introduced herself in this way, mentioning that she had previously been a green protestor, used crystals to aid meditation and preferred to buy the family’s food from local farm shops. Ali

summed up her approach by saying: “so [I’m] interested in finding ways of breaking through some of the things that I have found difficult in society” (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Although Ali had previously felt alienated from other sources within society however, it was her experience of coming up against some inflexible protocols within the medical establishment that prompted her sense of alienation during her transition into motherhood. Indeed, up until her first pregnancy, Ali said:

I think I always assumed I’d be a hospital birth kind of girl
... I was thinking, oh, I’m sure I’ll cope and I’m sure I’ll be
ok. Why do I need support? Everyone else seems to be
able to do it.

Ali traced the beginning of what she described as her “doula journey” back to the day that she bumped into a woman in a local farm shop. This woman had given Ali a leaflet advertising the local Norwich Birth Group which promotes home birthing and the work of doulas. Rather than immediately being attracted by the idea however Ali felt a mixture of curiosity and uncertainty, explaining, “I sort of put it [the leaflet] up on my fridge for a while and I think I was ... yeah, not so happy with the idea in a way” and in describing her feelings about the woman who had given her the leaflet, Ali said:

She had a very strong American accent. She’s a friend of mine now, I love her dearly, but at the time, perhaps at the time, her strength ... something made me shy away. I thought, oh no, she’s a bit scary!

This initial hesitation mirrors a number of other women’s journeys, such as that of Sue Monk Kidd who recounts witnessing a group of women celebrating the full moon by dancing, during her own experience of alienation. Describing her feelings at the time, she writes “I don’t think I’d ever felt so awkward, bewildered, or unsettled in my life, yet I was mesmerized” (1996, p. 37).

This tension between interest and uncertainty gradually subsided for Ali and she became a member of the birth group, which she began to attend regularly. Indeed,

encouraged by what she learnt there, Ali decided that she wanted a home birth. However, around the twenty sixth week of her pregnancy Ali discovered that her baby was in the breech position²⁶ and was subsequently advised by the NHS midwives to have a hospital birth. Yet, the leaders of the birth group held a different opinion. Ali recalled;

[it] was an incredibly emotional time and equally emotional to go to the birth group and say that my baby is breech and they ... I remember the vehemence coming from these strong women because they have so frequently come up against blocks from the system about home births ... and they said 'Well, they're just telling you it's breech because they don't want you to have a home birth!' So, I was having to fight them as well. It was very difficult!

So, Ali's sense of alienation was experienced during her first pregnancy when she felt torn between two schools of thought. She explained;

it was through that journey, very quickly I learnt that I was already a mother and that I had to decide what sort of birth I wanted. If I wanted her to be born naturally then I had to just step up.

Even though Ali had experienced alienation and awakenings in the past, her encounter with the medical establishment forced her once again to question the wisdom of the advice that she was being offered.

7.6.2 An Experience of Alienation Prompted by the Church

My interview with Miranda took place over ten years after she first became a mum through the birth of her daughter and six years after the last of a string of miscarriages. The miscarriages themselves also spanned a number of years and

²⁶ This means that her baby was lying feet first with its bottom downwards. In reference to Breech births the NHS website currently states that: "This makes your care more complicated. Your obstetrician and midwife will discuss with you the best and safest form of care. You will be advised to have your baby in hospital" (NHS Choices, 2015).

Miranda described experiences during this time of alienation from the church in a variety of different ways.

In respect of her faith, Miranda explained:

I had a very naïve faith based on God being good to me and helping me out and of course that all had to go, that all had to go. My happy ending faith had to go and that was really painful (Interview, 6 March 2012).

The sense that her own faith was being challenged was further exacerbated by the Christian community that she was part of. Miranda recalled:

you're meant to be life giving, but the medical explanation was that my immune system was just attacking these babies ... so there's a sense that I was killing them ... dealing with that is just really difficult and some of my [church] friends ... they all think that it's all mind over matter ... That you have control over these things, somehow, if you get your mind in the right place ... and I found some of that theology really difficult to deal with. The implications for me were pretty horrendous ... it can make you feel like a rubbish woman, or it certainly made me feel like one, defective, you know?

and along similar lines, later in the interview, she said:

You know, people who were saying, 'Are you praying properly? It will be ok' ... the number of people who told me miracle stories about people who had problems but eventually they got the baby ... you know, that was difficult, and also often attached to that Christianity is a real sort of exaltation of the family and of procreation.

In many ways these are implicit examples of a patriarchal faith, based on a Father God who will step in and grant people's dearest wish if their faith is strong enough and they pray hard enough. However, Miranda also mentioned more explicit instances in which the patriarchal basis of Christianity had further served to alienate her.

In one instance she mentioned the helpful ministry of an older friend “who was a deacon, she would later become a priest but she was one of those first women [to become priests] who were deacons for about a hundred years!” In this example Miranda alludes to the relatively recent decision to ordain women clergy in the Anglican Church and the long number of years in which only men could become priests. At another point in the interview, and based on her experience of miscarriage, Miranda made the comment, “I guess there may be male priests who may be good for women but they would have to be exceptional. It’s a kind of area that you want to be understood as a female, as a woman”.

Linked to the male domination of the clergy is the New Testament focus on Jesus as the Son of God and the lack of stories about women. Miranda explained that again based on her experience of miscarriage: “this was an area of my life where I didn’t see any parallels with Jesus’ life and so this idea [that] Jesus had been there, or been there before me just didn’t work”.

Thus, Miranda experienced alienation from the church community that she had been part of and from her faith during a series of miscarriages and the early years of her transition into motherhood. Both the implicit and explicit examples of the influence that patriarchy has had on the church corresponds with the wider field of feminist theological literature (Daly, 1986; Slee, 2004) which has sought to highlight the fact that women’s life experiences have not historically been reflected in the church’s structures, liturgies, texts or theology. The exclusion of women for so long, has resulted in some women (Monk Kidd, 1996) feeling alienated from the church and their faith at key points in their lives in much the same way as Miranda experienced.

7.6.3 An Experience of Alienation Prompted by the Myths Surrounding Motherhood

In describing her journey into motherhood through the birth of her first daughter, Edna talked about a very difficult pregnancy and first post-natal year during which both she and her daughter experienced health complications.

Although Edna had wanted to have a child and had at one level become a mother through birthing her daughter, Edna's experience of motherhood was at odds with her expectations. I have described in chapter 4 some of the reasons and sources for the nature of this kind of tension as well as pointing out that it is quite common amongst women who become mothers, particularly those who are diagnosed with or suffer from post-natal depression.

Rather than being able to recognise the sources and reasons for some of the myths that surround motherhood however, Edna at the time simply blamed herself, as this extract from her interview shows:

the sense of shame that I felt that I couldn't do it. I couldn't breastfeed properly. I couldn't be a mum properly and I couldn't even carry a baby in my tummy properly ... the shame was so significant that I hated myself for it. I truly hated myself for it. I felt that I had failed (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Although Edna described meeting up with other mums during the first year after her birthing, the stories and honesty that they shared within the group did not manage to entirely counter the myths that foster the fabricated image of the perfect mother. In Edna's mind this included the idea of breastfeeding, which she did for a year even though it had a detrimental effect on her own health. Reflecting on her experience during our interview Edna said;

It would have been good I'm sure if I had bottle fed ... I do regret it, I can see that there was a closeness that came from that, and I think there's probably a distance between us because of that ... you know, I was harming myself [breast]feeding her and there was an occasion once when I almost shook her.

Whether or not Edna should have breastfed her baby for so long in the light of her own physical and mental health is not my point. Rather, I have used her story as an example of the way in which women can find themselves, on becoming mothers, alienated from what they had perceived the role to be. This quotation also shows

the way in which the myths surrounding motherhood can create a sense of alienation between a mother and her baby.

Like the experiences of feeling alienated by an overly medicalised approach to birth or a church community, all of the women in my study encountered feelings of alienation which often led to periods of self-doubt, but sometimes also led to moments of discovery or further awakening.

7.7 Patterns of Women's Spirituality: Awakening

In the previous section I used three examples drawn from my research data to illustrate some of the ways in which all of the women I interviewed described experiences of alienation as part of their transition into motherhood. Moving on from this theme, I will now show how aspects of the stories of the women I interviewed also resonate with characteristics that have been identified within patterns of women's spirituality, often referred to within feminist literature as awakening.

The metaphor of awakening is based on the common experience of being woken up from sleep whether it be abruptly or gradually and occurs within a wide range of mystical writings and religious traditions (Harris, 1989, pp. 5-8). In relation to women's spirituality it has also been used "to describe the experience of enlightenment – the movement from conventional notions of the meaning of life to a more direct experience of the 'really real' or ground of being, from ordinary to extraordinary consciousness, from bondage to freedom" (Christ, 1995, p. 18).

Christ goes on to argue however that the experience of awakening is often different for women than it is for men. Like Walker Bynum for example, Christ suggests that whilst men's conversion experiences usually involve the giving up of worldly power, women often talk more in terms of "a coming of self, rather than a giving up of self, as a grounding of selfhood in the powers of being, rather than a surrender of self to the powers of being" (1995, p. 19). In the following section I will identify some of

the key themes that have emerged as characteristics of women's experiences of awakening and show how they resonate with my own research data.

7.7.1 An Exploration of the Themes of Women's Awakening

The first point, is that although not all of the women talked specifically in these terms, I would argue that the very act of choosing to ritually mark some part of their journey into motherhood is recognisable as a form of awakening. I consider this particularly because these actions took place within a society that does not popularly acknowledge becoming a mother as an important transition in a woman's life and there are currently no widely recognised ways of marking it. As Christ suggests: "Through awakening to new powers, women overcome self-negation and self-hatred and refuse to be victims" (1995, p. 13).

Although some of the women I interviewed continued to feel 'stuck' and frustrated after their rituals, Christ also acknowledges that as long as women live within a male-centred society, the experience of nothingness, which she refers to it as, or alienation will reappear (1995, p. 14). Equally, as Slee discovered from the women's stories in her study most of the narratives suggested: "not one moment of awakening, but an ongoing, often gradual process of working through paralysis and dependency" (2004, p. 125) or as Sue Monk Kidd writes of her own experience: "There had been a moment, many moments really, when truth seized me and I 'conceived' myself as woman" (1996, p. 7).

So, although the women's ritualizing did not always represent an instant or pivotal turning point in the individual's spirituality I would argue that there are elements of awakening in the impetus, preparation and often the execution of each of the homemade rituals and ritualizing that I have described in the previous chapter.

Another factor that supports this point is Christ's assertion that women's mystical experiences, which she suggests often prompt women's awakenings, usually occur within nature or in community with other women (1995, p. 13). Although, like the women in Slee's research, few of my interviewees spoke of mystical experiences,

the recurrence of the themes of nature and the support of other women was striking from within my own research data.

The most obvious example of the way in which nature emerged as a theme within the women's stories comes of course from the fact that however medicalized the process becomes, birthing is an experience that acts as a reminder of the power of our bodies and the strength of our connection as human beings with the natural world. As Maria Harris notes: "Pregnancy and birth and nursing children are ... occasions for understanding our bodies and – if we take time – our spirituality" (1989, p. 10).

However, the theme of nature and the women's sense of connection to it emerged in other ways too. Jackie and Miranda both chose to hold their rituals outside, for example, with Jackie's taking place in a garden and Miranda choosing a beach. Nature was also a common source of the symbols that the women chose, such as butterflies which were a feature of both Jemma and Maria's rituals whilst flowers opening became an important symbol for Ruth during her birthing.

Additionally, although Edna chose to hold her ritual inside, her story mentions no details of the room she chose to sit in but does include a vivid description of nature, prompted by the view from the window:

I remember it was May ... it was evening time and the sky was really blue ... we were in [a] top flat and it was just so beautiful. It was like living in a tree ... there was a sycamore tree ... I can still picture the blue sky and the sycamore tree and just sitting and being silent (Interview, 19 November 2010).

Similarly, in recalling what was helpful to her from her time on retreat before her birthing, Janet said:

Of the bits I remember about it, the play thing was the most obvious and doing the clay ... rather than any especially meaningful set of words ... the company I think, and being in the vegetable garden. That was great. The sight of all the vegetables ... It was a really lovely

September. A golden September. It was a lovely garden they had there and I just loved sitting in it. This sense of a warm spot (Interview, 10 May 2010).

Indeed, Janet went on to talk about the way in which those memories have acted as common threads connecting past to present and that it is still important to her and evocative for her when she plants seeds and harvests vegetables from her own garden. Marking the seasons had also become important to Monica, albeit in a different way: "since being on maternity leave, I've marked seasonality, equinox, that sort of thing. I'm much more drawn to do that now" (Interview, 17 August 2009).

So, although the women's connectedness to nature during this time was experienced and described in a variety of different ways, it was a dominant theme that ran across all ten of the interviews I conducted both in terms of the experience of childbirth itself as well as the women's use and awareness of nature. The importance of other women's support was also a recurring theme, mentioned by Janet in the extract above but also evidenced by the people invited to the rituals or to support the women in birthing as I have explored in the previous chapter.

That is not to suggest that the women did not mention the support of men, particularly partners during their interviews, but as Jackie explained: "it happens in your body. It's not the same for men ... I definitely think that, I needed my women friends around me to understand the things I couldn't share with him" (Interview, 20 March 2012).

In fact, the importance of female support was clear both in terms of the times it was present and when it was talked about in reference to the isolation that women felt when it was absent. Miranda for example spoke about feeling alone during her experience of miscarriage because although she was a mother she did not feel part of the community of women of her own age who were going on to have two or more children.

Similarly, in speaking about some of her close female relations, one women commented: “there are issues about the other women around me, significant women in my life that I would have hoped would have been there and been a positive part of that [early motherhood] experience” (Interview, 19 November 2010). So, whether women’s support was expressed because of its absence or presence, the theme emerged strongly from within my research data.

I would also suggest that when a group of women were present to offer support during a woman’s birthing and her early transition into motherhood, whether it be through an organisation like the Norwich Birth Group or a gathering of family and friends, it seemed to have an empowering effect on the woman concerned. Indeed, it is within groups like this, where female friendships are free to flourish, that an awakening can occur (Hunt, 1991; Slee, 2004).

Thus, whether they are signs of awakening or elements that contributed towards one, nature and the support of other women were both strong themes that emerged from within my research data. The recurrence of these themes throughout my data also helps to support my assertion that the women’s homemade rituals and ritualizing are all examples of awakening which has been identified as a significant pattern within women’s spirituality, particularly amongst feminists. To conclude this section I will continue with Ali’s story in order to show how her experience of birthing and motherhood was intimately bound up with an awakening experience.

7.7.2 A Story of Awakening

In the last section where I explored the theme of alienation, I explained that before Ali became pregnant with her first child, she had been keen to seek out alternative ways to live, although prior to attending the Norwich Birth Group, she had always thought of herself as “a hospital birth kind of girl” (Interview, 19 November 2010).

In other words, through past experiences, Ali had found herself alienated from society’s expectations and ways of doing things. This had then led to her choosing

alternative paths, which can be seen as previous examples of awakening. It was not until her encounter with the “strong women” of the birth group however, that Ali began to question the conventional wisdom of going into hospital, and started to explore possible alternatives.

In connection to this latter awakening, I will highlight four themes that are characteristics common to other women’s experience. The first relates to the level of emotional difficulty that can often accompany such a momentous change. In recalling her journey away from deciding to have a conventional hospital birth, Ali explained:

we’ve got generations of breaking down the, the feminine in us ... we’ve lost the threads, we’ve lost the threads, I think. So, I guess I think [I was] trying to forge those threads, for my own journey really ... I needed to find some of those threads, and that came through a lot of tears and a lot of pain.

Christ (1995), Slee (2004) and Monk Kidd (1996) all refer to the pain that women can experience during the process of awakening and suggest that it often evolves from the need to give up long held beliefs and assumptions for something that is far less clear or certain. The threads that Ali speaks of are gradually being uncovered and pieced together by feminists from a variety of angles, such as the work of Christ (1998) or Schüssler Fiorenza (1983), but may not be immediately accessible or obvious, and takes time to work through. This leads me on to a second characteristic of women’s awakening: uncovering the past.

Sue Monk Kidd speaks of discovering the Greek myth of Ariadne, and surmising its origins that predated patriarchy. In a similar way, in response to my initial questionnaire, Ali wrote: “Symbols of woman giving birth to the world (‘Sheila na Gig’ type image) helped me getting in touch with the earthiness of being woman, blood, wisdom, creativity, the ancient line of birthing woman” (Personal communication, 11 March 2010). So, Ali searched for images from the past which helped her to feel a connection with previous generations of birthing women, just

as Monk Kidd describes working with the ancient myth of Ariadne in order to understand parts of her own journey.

The third characteristic that I found within Ali's transcript and which also appears in the accounts of other women's experiences of awakening is the importance of trusting your own instincts, as this extract from Ali's interview reveals, "I've looked for the ancient truths rather than what is presented to us as the truth because I don't believe it. It's not where my heart is" (Interview, 19 November 2010).

The experience of learning to trust your own instincts corresponds with some of Slee's data (2004, pp. 115-6) and echoes the movement from "received knowledge" to "subjective knowledge" where intuitive and bodily ways of knowing are given priority over the authority of others, described by Belenky and her colleagues (1986).

As I looked through the transcript of Ali's interview and reflected on her story it became clear to me that the confidence to trust her own instincts took time to evolve. Rather than creating a kit bag as she had for her first birth that could travel with her to the hospital for example, Ali created non transportable spaces within her own home in which to birth her second and third children. Although Ali never completely dismissed the possibility of needing to go into hospital if the need arose, the permanence of her last two created spaces suggests a more settled confidence than she felt during her first birthing experience.

I also realise that Ali's trust in the wisdom of her doula grew as time went on too, and that this relationship was instrumental in empowering Ali to believe in her own abilities. She thus began to rely less on the advice and health checks offered by the NHS and more on her own instincts, as the following example shows:

when Lila was born ... first of all she was so afraid, she was clinging to me like a leaf. She was just like a baby monkey. She was just like, 'Oh, my goodness, you are kidding me! Where am I? What's going on?' So actually I asked the [NHS] midwives to come and weigh her the next day. We just had skin to skin for 24 hours, which was

just ... I'm so glad that I had that information [from the birth group] that that was a good thing to do. It felt right, but the group helped it to feel less crazy, but that's all I wanted to do, just hold her.

The fourth and final feature of Ali's awakening that corresponds with the pattern of other women's journeys is that her path led her away from more conventionally recognised sources of spirituality and towards an awareness that is much harder to define or contain. As Ali explained, "I struggle with words because I don't know what box I - I don't think I'm in a box. I don't quite know where my spirituality belongs". This description is synonymous with that of Sue Monk Kidd's experience who used the symbol of a labyrinth to make sense of her own journey (1996, p. 112).

On the subject of awakening, I have highlighted women's friendships and nature as important themes within my data, emphasised the women's ritualizing as examples of awakening and drawn out four themes from Ali's story that resonate with characteristics of other women's experience. However, alongside my belief that birthing and a woman's transition into motherhood can be fertile times for a spiritual awakening, I also want to recognise my hesitation in over emphasising this point.

The need for time is inherent within some of the literature that exists on the subject of women's spiritual awakening. Maria Harris (1989) for example suggests a seven step approach with "practices" at the end of each chapter to work through. Similarly, Sue Monk Kidd's account of her own spiritual awakening spans a period of several years and involved a great deal of time spent in solitude, reading and going away on retreat.

Indeed, Slee makes the point, based on her own research sample that it is mainly reflective of a small middle-class privileged elite and so the findings of other women from different backgrounds may show very different patterns of experience (2004, p. 133). In relation to my own research I simply want to make the point that for many women, the experience of childbirth and the realities of early motherhood

are often characterised by a lack of time to sleep never mind space to think reflectively about the self.

Thus, alongside my belief that this period can be a fertile time for an awakening I also recognise that the realisation of some of these experiences may take much longer to evolve. The role that longstanding friendships can play during this time and the invaluable impact over the longer term of reflective journaling should not be underestimated. As Slee wrote in relation to her own research:

accounts of women's descriptions of the experiences of awakening demonstrate the variety and particularity of such experiences. They may be sudden or gradual; they may be short-lived, intense experiences lasting a matter of mere hours or even minutes, or they may cover much longer periods of time during which the issues are worked with again and again until resolution is achieved (2004, p. 133).

Just as my data emphasises the point that the transition into motherhood takes time to evolve, so too the seeds of an awakening, which I have shown can occur during this fertile period, may lie dormant for a while before eventually having the time and space in which to flourish. Rather than putting increased pressure on women to be spiritually aware, at a time in their lives when they may already be feeling overburdened, I simply want to highlight birthing and motherhood as times in which life changing experiences can occur that have the potential to nourish a woman's spirituality at the time and into the future.

7.8 Patterns of Women's Spirituality: Relationality

The third and final theme that Slee uses to describe the patterns of women's spirituality and faith development is that of relationality. The concept has become a prevalent way of categorising and understanding women's experiences across the areas of psychology as well as feminist ethics and theology over recent decades (Neuger, 1999). It has also enabled feminists to re-evaluate the role and importance of nurturing and caring skills in the lives of women.

As I have already mentioned, the theme of relationality can be found within the theology of feminists such as Carter Hayward (1982) and Mary Grey (1989), alongside others who have suggested that women's spirituality emerges from and can be characterised by a profound sense of relational awareness. As Katherine Zappone writes: "in its broadest sense, spirituality centres on our awareness and experience of relationality. It *is* the relational component of lived experience" (1991, p. 12).

Although I have found it a helpful concept through which to explore and categorise my own data I am also mindful of its limitations however, particularly in terms of the life stage of the women I have interviewed. Slee (2004) and others have drawn attention to the danger of assuming that feminist theologies of relationality can account for the experience of all women regardless of class and ethnicity (Thistlethwaite, 1990; Graham, 1995).

In terms of my own topic of research, I am also aware that by emphasizing the importance of relationships I could be seen to be reinforcing stereotypes or adding to the burden of care that can often already feel overwhelming in the early years of motherhood. However, I am also attentive to the fact that, particularly in the early years of a child's life, being a mother is fundamentally and inescapably about the care and nurture of a dependent being, during which the self can often seem to be or indeed becomes subsumed.

With this sensitivity in mind, I want to use the concept of relationality to explore how the spirituality of the women I interviewed was affected by their experiences of birthing and motherhood, but be discriminating. In other words, I am aware that not all relationships are good, and that within patriarchal culture, there is still a strong tendency for women to be the primary care givers.

Whilst some of the relationships of the women I interviewed were inevitably shaped by patriarchal expectations and assumptions, there was also evidence that the women were aware of some of these limitations and when they could, were working to overcome them. I have also highlighted some of the tensions

experienced by the women I interviewed in relation to their experience of motherhood.

Thus, alongside the assertion that the transition into motherhood can be a difficult journey for women, I also want to suggest that it can be an insightful phase within a woman's life in terms of her spirituality, given the intensity of the experience and the fundamental role that relatedness and connection plays within it. That is not to suggest that motherhood as a role for women should ever remain static or prevail as a primary focus. Rather, as I have suggested in chapter 4, I believe that motherhood evolves over the course of woman's life and that the intense experiences of the early days have the potential to inform and enhance her ongoing spiritual journey.

Although the women touched on the theme of relationality in a variety of ways, I have chosen to focus on three stories from within my data to illustrate this. The first focuses on the way in which the experience of birthing and the transition into motherhood can affect and shape a woman's sense of connectedness to her own body, to God and to the world.

7.8.1 A Woman's Sense of Relationality to Her Own Body

According to Zappone (1991) one of the defining characteristics of women's relational spirituality is a rejection of dualistic thinking which separates amongst other things, humanity and nature, mind and body, spirituality and sexuality. Thus, rather than the act of conception and childbirth being seen as something which must be purified or redeemed through a liturgy or sacrament of the church, the human body is understood to be the site and source of spiritual revelation in and of itself (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the topic of my interviews, the women I spoke to, mentioned their relationship with their own bodies frequently and in a variety of ways. Some of them expressed wonder and awe in terms of their body's power and wisdom, whilst others talked about their frustration that their body had not been

able to do what it was ‘naturally’ supposed to do, or unease about the impact upon their body of the birthing process. Whilst other women expressed a mixture of these two positions, the experience of childbirth clearly prompted a re-evaluation by each of the women of their relationship with their own body at some level.

For Miranda this journey involved a very difficult and painful process after her string of miscarriages and one that she realised she needed to undertake alone. In response to one of my questions during the interview about whether her experience of childbirth and miscarriage had felt like a joint or separate journey from that of her husband’s, Miranda commented:

It was a journey that we went on together, and yet - it was a very unequal journey in the sense that the physical journey was all happening to me and he was just watching ... the thing about dealing with your relationship with your body ... is the kind of thing you have to do on your own (Interview, 6 March 2012).

Miranda described this process as a journey which clearly evolved over a long period of time and required a great deal of personal reflection. She explained that it had involved trying to:

come from seeing myself as a place of death. That death takes place in me ... you know, to seeing myself as something alive and, life giving. But that I think is the hardest thing about miscarriage. That you’ve had death in you. You’ve been a tomb, and ... somehow, you’ve got to go on this journey where the womb becomes a place of life again.

After rejecting the “happy ending” faith of her childhood and feeling alienated from the Christian community that she had been part of, Miranda turned to the Bible and alongside maternal images of God which she found helpful in the Hebrew scriptures, Miranda worked with the concept of resurrection. She explained:

What became really important actually was the idea of the tomb becoming a place of resurrection and being able to see that as something possible for me ... that out of this tomb you could, new life could come forth even if it

wasn't ... even if the resurrected body ... wasn't the body we wanted or thought we wanted but something different.

As well as hoping for another baby, Miranda explained that at the time she was also about to embark on an academic career on the theme of motherhood, so that alongside the loss of hope around having a second child she also experienced the loss of her worked for and anticipated career. However, the "resurrected body" that she refers to symbolised a very different future from anything that she had planned for or imagined at the time, "funnily enough it's being recaptured in a different context. And all of this will inform [my ministry]. And the academic work that I'm doing now, you know, will work in that context too".

The reflective work that Miranda did also enabled her not to try to forget or reject the difficulties that she had experienced in the past but to integrate them:

there's a sense of redemption and you know, not wasting ... the thing about miscarriage is that you think, oh, what a waste ... what is that for? What's the point of that? And finding a point to it is the key thing.

Miranda's embodied reflections resonate with two important themes, characteristic of feminist relational spirituality. The first relates to Miranda's reworking of the image of herself as a tomb, a place of death, to thinking of her womb in terms of a source of life, hope and resurrection. This process reflects a model put forward by Mary Grey (1989) who has built on the work of Carter Hayward (1982), rethinking some of the classic notions of Christianity, such as atonement, revelation and redemption with reference to the concept of relationality.

Grey, who tends to use the term of connectedness rather than relationality, describes two different poles as being fundamental to the process of redemption. She writes firstly about the need for self-affirmation and then about the importance of establishing right relationships with others, but emphasises the need, particularly for women, to come to a sense of the self first.

Miranda recognised the need to work on her perception of herself alone, which would then enable her to work together with her partner on their relationship as a couple. With reference to her reworking of the image of the tomb, Miranda's efforts also reflect Heyward's assertion that redemption is not something that is done for us but a process that we must actively participate in ourselves.

Thus for Miranda, the concept of resurrection was not only something that happened to the Son of God but became a transformation that could take place within her own body. The sense of redemption was possible, not because of what Jesus did *for* her, but as an action that she participated in herself, made possible through God's transcendence.

Again, Heyward reinterprets the traditional Christian understanding, so that rather than God being over and above us, God's transcendence is the source and guarantee of our own ability to make connections (1982, p. 245). In Miranda's case, this meant to connect again with her own body and sense of self, then to work together with her husband on their relationship and latterly to use her experience to reach out to others through her ministry.

The second way in which Miranda's reflections echo a characteristic of feminist relational spirituality is the way in which she seeks to integrate her miscarriage experiences rather than try to forget them. She describes trying to find a point to them, that she can live with, rather than a reason for them that she must try to move away from.

This mirrors Slee's research findings, who makes the comment that "the most pervasively relational theme to emerge in the interviews was the ideal of integration, holism and inclusivity which, for almost all of the women, represented the goal of their spirituality" (2004, p. 154).

Certainly for Miranda, whilst the pain of the past was still evident as she retold her story to me during the interview, her experience of motherhood through childbirth and miscarriage, had deepened her spirituality. She was no longer dependent on a

transcendent other who might be good to her, but had instead discovered her connection to the source of all relationality which had then empowered her to heal her relationship with herself and then to reconnect with others.

7.8.2 A Woman's Sense of Relationality to God

Just as Miranda's experience of miscarriage prompted her to explore maternal images of God, a number of the women's journeys into motherhood caused them to revisit their understanding and relationship with God.

Jackie had attended church as a child but had found herself feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the faith that she had grown up with and the institution of the church during her teenage years. At university she had then been introduced to different models of God, one of which was that of a Divine Mother, and it was this relational metaphor that she found herself revisiting around the time of her own transition into motherhood.

Jackie explained that she had spent a great deal of time thinking about what being a mother meant and entailed before her own children were born, partly because of the loss of her own mother. She said: "when you don't have something you become more aware of what it is. You can peer into the gap and say well it's this sort of shape" (Interview, 20 March 2012).

By the time of the interview, Jackie had become the mother of two children and so her reflections on motherhood can be seen as a considered weaving together of memory, culture and personal experience, and took the following form:

for me it's a sense of ... a massive sense of holding and, a sense of someone that loves you whatever. Whether you're being useless or ill or you know, whatever ... a complete kind of, sort of backstop position, yeah, reliable love. They might be angry with you but you sort of know that you are safe there.

For Jackie, there was a strong relationship between this model of motherhood and her image of the Divine Mother. The importance to Jackie of the constancy and

dependability of God that this image suggests was also a recurring theme for the women that Slee interviewed. In fact, they used a wide variety of relational metaphors to describe God, but the importance of constancy and dependability was seen by Slee to be a common and crucial theme (2004, p. 140).

In some ways of course, it could be argued that swapping one parental image for another is not particularly different, and that both models have a tendency to idealize and overemphasise our role as children. Thus rather than introducing new patterns of relationship with God, involving full and responsible personhood, we remain dependent and prone to follow infantile patterns of behaviour.

However, Jackie's image of the Divine Mother includes other important themes which also connect with the writings of feminists, offering a different alternative to the traditional notion of a male deity. Firstly, for example, rather than seeing herself simply as a child of the Divine Mother, Jackie also saw herself as part of a long line of women:

as I was becoming a mother there were lots of times
when people kind of affirmed that I was now part of that
... a sense of the mother standing behind you, and behind
them their mother and behind them all the mothers going
back and back and back and that somehow behind all of
that and greater than all of that is the Divine Mother and
there's something about the whole ... huge scope of that.

I find this image personally very appealing. It reminds me of my initial attraction to the idea that through childbirth I had undergone a rite of passage; that I had become part of something bigger. It also reminds me of Diann Neu's liturgy for a Mother-to-Be that included a recalling of each person's matrilineage (2003, p. 225) and of Sue Monk Kidd's adoption of a Matryoshka²⁷ doll as a symbol of the Divine Feminine (1996, p. 180). The image also relates to Alison Stone's criticism of the

²⁷ Matryoshka means 'mother' in Russian. These dolls are more commonly referred to in the UK as Russian nesting dolls.

traditional understanding that a child's maturation must involve a severing of ties with their mother (2012, p. 164).

In Jackie's model, the Divine Mother is the source of relationality which binds people together across the generations. There is a strong sense of constancy and dependability alongside that of learning at the feet of those who have gone before as well as a sense of responsibility for the nurturing of the next generation.

In other words, whilst Jackie's image is one of a parent, her relationship with God encompasses the ability to change. It suggests that because of her connection to her source she is empowered to develop and fulfil her own relationships. As Sallie McFague argues, by revisioning God as mother we introduce the concept of a love that is unifying and reuniting, non-hierarchical and inclusive (1989, p. 143).

Although loving descriptions of Father God can be found in the Bible, our perception of father love often includes a level of distance that emanates from the classical approach to theology that has dominated our thinking for so long. Theism has shaped our understanding of how God relates to the world. According to theism God is distant and beyond and although this view has been broken down to a certain extent by present day theologies, the concept of a heavenly hierarchy with God at the top still permeates our thinking through creeds, hymns and biblical readings. In contrast, for Jackie, within the image of the Divine Mother "there's a sort of physical sense in there ... in the sense that a Divine Father feels like he might be a bit airy and distant, [but] there's a very bodily felt sense of the Divine Mother".

I have argued that the image of the Divine Mother that Jackie had been introduced to at university and revisited when she herself became a mother suggests a very different model of relationship. It is no longer a relationship simply of dependence but a connection of empowerment, in which Jackie is related to others as well as to her source.

The last difference that this image of the feminine Divine suggests was summed up by Jackie when she said:

when you kind of find a woman bringing you just the right thing at the right time. There's a sense of, that's the kind of, what's the word for it, lots of manifesting if you like, of the Divine Mother, in a very practical sort of way.

Rather than the dualistic thinking that I mentioned in the previous section in which everyday tasks such as feeding, washing and caring for children are seen as separate from the realm of the holy, the image of a Divine Mother helps to incorporate everything into a whole. Thus the helpful actions of a friend or the supportive words of a stranger become a manifestation of God. This symbol, based on women's experience of the everyday gives us permission to embrace the holiness of the ordinary as well as of our bodies. In the words of Monk Kidd,

Restoring the feminine symbol of Deity means that divinity will no longer be *only* heavenly, other, out there, up there, beyond time and space, beyond body and death. It will also be right here, right now, in me, in the earth, in this river and this rock, in excrement and roses alike (1996, p. 160).

Not all of the women I interviewed explored feminine images of God during their transition into motherhood, but each of them spoke of experiencing their relationship with God in different ways. For Jackie, her journey into motherhood did not lead her to reject images of a male or Father God, but rather brought her closer to the feminine during this particular phase of her life, as she explains:

for me that's much more immediate than thinking about any other kind of Divine Father. You kind of think the Divine Father ought to be there as well, but at the moment I feel much more in touch with the Divine Mother.

Jackie's experience of motherhood caused her to revisit the image of a Divine Mother and relate to it in a new and very intimate way, based on her own experience. The image also empowered her to see her own actions and those of the women around her as part of God, rather than something separate.

7.8.3 A Woman's Sense of Relationality to the World

The third and final theme that I want to explore in terms of relationality is the way in which the women's experience of childbirth and early motherhood impacted on their understanding of their connection to the world around them. Again I have chosen to focus on one woman's story to illustrate this point.

Elaine described experiencing a feminist awakening whilst she was a student and saw her decision to have a child a number of years later, as an extension of this. In her pregnancy journal, Elaine wrote the following words on a separate page, almost as a heading or introduction to the rest of the journal:

This child is my gift of love to the world. An expression of my hope and my commitment to continue the struggle to make the world a better place, a nurturant place that encourages human growth and potential and love rather than a place that destroys it (Journal entry, transcribed).

This passage reflects another important aspect of relational spirituality because within it Elaine connects childbirth which occurred within the interpersonal sphere, to the world around her. In Elaine's experience this sense of connection evolved out of an active involvement in issues of social justice which she saw not only as her work but also as an extension of her spirituality. During the interview Elaine explained to me:

I would be a part of communities of women who were looking at issues of justice and for me that was a spiritual experience and so ... I was out of church from the age of 14 until I got pregnant ... I went to church when I was pregnant ... because I thought, oh, a community of value ... they were doing things in the community that were justice orientated. And so [there is a] sense of my spirituality being about justice and human potential (Interview, 2 November 2010).

Again this connects back to the work of Carter Heyward (1982) who develops the idea of God as intimately related to the world and the source of all relational power rather than a deity who is somewhat removed from the world's struggles and must

be called upon to fix things. Heyward highlights the interdependence of everything and the importance of reaching out and connecting with all that seems alien or different to us.

Thus justice becomes something that we are called to actively participate in, because, as Heyward writes: "Without our touching there is no God. Without our relation there is no God. Without our crying, our raging, our yearning, there is no God" (1982, p. 172). For Elaine, having a child was an extension of her work for justice because her love for her daughter represented a positive relationship within a world of broken connections.

For Elaine, the ritual that she developed to share her birthing story with her daughter thus had two functions. The first, as I have already suggested was for Elaine's benefit, because amongst other things she wanted "someone to know my story". The second function of the ritual was an extension of her work for justice into the future, as Elaine explained during the interview:

Giving a human being their story so that they can grow into the potential that they have to bless the world because we are here as a sign of, and I use the word God very loosely. I think of God as the energy that connects, that holds the world together and [it] is about ... about the fullness of life and the flourishing of the planet and the people.

This resonates with Maria Harris' concept of "traditioning" which represents the sixth step within her model for women's spirituality (1989, p. 145). She bases the idea on the concept of generativity, which assumes that our human lives remain unfulfilled if we get to the end of the cycle of life without trying to make the world a better place for future generations. Part of this work she suggests is to hand on the spirituality and good we have learnt to the next generation.

I would argue that the passing on of birthing stories fulfils both of the actions that Harris suggests. Firstly because it empowers a person with a sense of intention and belonging, as Elaine said:

there's something about knowing that you are beloved at birth that gives a person a sense that I belong in this world ... I belong in this world and I am who I am ... It's firm ground to stand on.

Secondly, and potentially even more importantly, by telling our birthing stories we formulate and pass on wisdom. I noticed from my research data for example that amongst the women I interviewed who had birthed more than once, everyone made different decisions as time went on, based on their previous experience. So the passing on of stories is important in the accumulation of wisdom and knowledge that can inform future choices, not only our own, but potentially those of other people as well.

However, based on research from the healthcare literature I also want to suggest that the passing on of birthing stories can help women to make connections between their lived experience and their spirituality. Callister for example suggests that sharing birth stories can be a significant experience for childbearing women (2010) whilst Hall and Taylor conclude that "When women tell their birth stories, they often do so in the language and framework of a spiritual experience, and they use terms such as 'holiness' and 'miraculous'" (2004, p. 45).

Similarly, it has been suggested that not only is a woman's experience of childbirth enhanced by the retelling of her birthing story, but that "forming narratives also allows the teller to own the experience" (Ashurst-McGee, 1997, p. 138). Lastly, going back to Sered's assertion that although the Jewish women that she interviewed reported a heightened sense of holiness after birth, they "lack[ed] the language to express that feeling. Even those who had a spiritual experience couldn't find language for it" (1991, p. 16).

By linking Elaine's ritual to Harris' concept of traditioning whilst also drawing on literature from the healthcare sector I would argue that the retelling of birth stories has an important role to play in helping women to make links between their lived experience and their spirituality and find language for those connections.

So, Elaine talked about her daughter's birth as an act of justice; an action that she hoped and believed would help to make the world a better place. The purpose of the ritual was not only for Elaine to have her story heard but also to create a firm foundation from which her daughter could grow and potentially also bless the world through her life and work. I have then gone on to argue that the retelling of birthing stories has an important role to play in empowering women to reflect upon their lived experience, not only in order to inform future decisions but also to create new language for their spirituality.

7.9 A Theological Reflection on Birth and Baptism

Lizzie rolls over in bed and opens one bleary eye to look at the clock.
It is 5.25am. She groans, rolls over towards Zack, and tries to get back to sleep.

Mia has been awake for hours.
Her partner Joe is asleep upstairs
and in the quiet twilight,
she has been sitting,
then pacing,
waiting,
hoping,
that it is time.

At 6.10am Lizzie resigns herself to yet another early start.
The children are already awake
and she has forgotten to get the profiteroles out of the freezer!

At 6.10am Mia calls her doula.
Jenny has become a good friend in the months leading up to the birth,
preparing Mia and Joe for what to expect,
calming their fears and latterly Mia's frustration
that the pregnancy would never end.

By 7am breakfast is finished and the kitchen is in disarray.
The profiteroles are hopefully thawing out on the counter,
and Charlie has at last been persuaded to forgo his football match
with the promise of extra time on his computer game,
on the condition that he comes with the rest of the family
to Ben's christening.

Jenny is greeted at the door by a grateful Joe,
who lets her in, and then goes through to the kitchen
to put on the kettle,
and make some toast for breakfast for anyone who is hungry.

In spite of her early start, Lizzie, as ever, is running late.
After agreeing that Megan can wear jeans to the baptism,
if she wears a smart top,
the said top is eventually found at the bottom of the washing basket,
ironed, worn and then spattered with toothpaste.
The wet patches from Lizzie's frantic attempts to clean the top
are still evident as they pull out of the driveway.

She had wedged the box of just decorated profiteroles
onto the parcel shelf of the car,
in the hope that they would survive the journey intact.

By this time, Mia has retreated to the bathroom.

The cold stone floor feels good on her bare feet,
and she sits on the toilet,
cocooned in the half light,
opening,
silent, focused, expectant.

With each contraction, she enters a dream space,
a void between worlds,
and between each wave she is soothed by the voices beyond the door,
talking, laughing, getting things ready.
Tethering her to the earth.

They pull into the church car park at 9.07am,
too late to sneak the profiteroles round to the church hall for the reception afterwards.

They are greeted at the door by a disapproving woman,
who confirms that the service has already started,
and that they should slip in *QUIETLY* at the back.

Lizzie notices the woman's hat.
She hadn't realised that people still wore hats to church.
She self-consciously tucks her hair behind her ears,
suddenly aware that she hadn't had time to dry it before she came out.

At the same moment Mia's waters break.
A gush, running down her legs
and out onto the floor.
But she feels hot now,
her skin clammy and her hair damp.

She feels thirsty
and shouts for a drink.
Her hands, shaking as she reaches out
are steadied by Joe as he carefully guides the glass to her lips,
as she slurps at the wonderful,
cool,
refreshing

water.

The church is large,
although the wooden box pew that they have squeezed into
could do with being a little bit bigger.
Zack shifts awkwardly next to her.
He has always hated church.

Mia senses that the contractions are changing,
and feels the urge to push.
She moves through to the living room,
where Joe asks what he can do to help.

Jenny suggests that he massages Mia's feet.

His touch feels good – steady, firm, gentle.

The vicar is a tall man,
wearing spotless white robes
with an accent that Lizzie finds it hard to place.
His voice is 'churchy' and seemingly emotionless;

'...In baptism the Lord is adding to our number
those whom he is calling.'

Mia shifts position
stamping her feet,
leaning on the sofa,
kneeling on all fours,
singing her way through each contraction,
long, loud tones to echo the feelings inside her.

The organist plays the opening chords to the baptismal hymn
as they all stand to sing.
Lizzie had suggested the hymn
when Sarah confessed that she and Mike were struggling to think of one.
She had remembered it from school.

The waves are stronger now, and Mia hears herself whimper.
She feels tired.
She wants to sleep.
She wants to lie down.

'In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light.
To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him.
Therefore I ask:
Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?'

Lizzie sighs, and looks out of the window.

She wonders if the sun is shining on the profiteroles,

at which point they will probably be inedible
by the time the service has finished.

Mia asks Jenny to examine her.
She wants reassurance,
but Jenny calmly explains that there is nothing that she needs to do.
That Mia possesses all that she needs.

Jenny shows her how to examine herself,
so that she can understand what is happening,
and what else needs to be done.

The baby's head is crowning.

'...cleansed from sin and born again.'

Charlie yawns and Megan giggles.
Half wanting to join in,
Lizzie directs a disapproving stare in their direction.

Leaning back against Joe, Mia reaches for a kiss.

It is hard to see much from where they are sitting,
but as the vicar makes the sign of the cross on Ben's head,
he lets out a loud, startled cry.

'Thank God!' whispers the hatted woman
who has positioned herself in the pew behind them.
Lizzie turns round and catches the woman's eye
who seems surprised to have been overheard.

Knowledgably the woman explains that the baby's cry is a good sign,
that the devil has come out of him.

Their kisses bring on a major wave of contraction.
Mia shifts position, so that she is facing towards the window,
towards the light.

Surrounded, but alone.

Legs spread wide,
Mia feels as though her body will rip apart completely with another contraction.

'...and prepare us for that glorious day
when the whole creation will be made perfect.'

Guiding the baby out,
Jenny catches it,
and then gently places the baby on Mia,
skin to skin,
bloodied and beautiful.

The baby cries out,
and the three of them laugh.

With tears in her eyes, Jenny whispers hoarsely
'Congratulations! You have a beautiful baby girl.'

'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism...
We welcome you into the fellowship of faith;
we are children of the same heavenly Father;
we welcome you.'

Overwhelmed and amazed Mia sighs.
'Welcome little one,' she says, and lies back, exhausted.

7.9.1 Unpacking the Theological Reflection

Over the course of this thesis I have argued that a woman's rite of passage into motherhood through childbirth is a significant transition in a woman's life cycle and in this chapter I have highlighted examples from within my data to show the ways in which this lived experience also impacted upon the women's spirituality. In the theological reflection above I have then gone beyond what my data specifically says, but towards where I sense it points.

The theological reflection draws on the work of feminist theologians such as Daly (1986) who have critiqued the way in which the church has sanitised and spiritualised birthing by re-enacting it as baptism and have superseded the mother's embodied act with that of a benevolent, patriarchal God. Juxtaposing the two events of birthing and baptism has enabled me to allude to a number of important issues that have emerged out of my research journey that I do not have the space to fully explore in this thesis, but are nevertheless important to mention.

Firstly, I want to assert that fundamentally baptism is a rite of Christian initiation and as such I would concur with Watson, who suggests that an understanding of baptism as the washing away of original sin can no longer be considered to be "an appropriate act of welcome of a human being ... into a church which celebrates the goodness of all human life and of female sexuality in particular" (2002, p. 82).

Secondly, I would argue that as a Christian rite of initiation, baptism was never intended, and thus not designed as a ritual to welcome a baby into the world or mark a woman's rite of passage into motherhood. Whilst I believe that it would be pastorally insensitive to exclude people from using the rite in this way, other creative ways of ritualizing these experiences need to be sought that are more relevant to people's lived experience.

As I have mentioned in relation to some of the women's ritualizing in this thesis, such events run the risk of not "garner[ing] broad social support" (Grimes, 2000, p. 29). However, I would also argue that partly because they are more risky, they do not tend to evoke experiences of "ritual boredom" (Driver, 2006, p. 7) and therefore have more potential to be transformative.

Lastly, I want to suggest that based on my own experience and interpretation of my research data, birthing itself should be understood as a sacrament. Susan Ross (2001), in her development of a feminist sacramental theology, argues that our sacramental understanding needs to be expanded to include the embodied realities of women's lives.

In exploring the definition of a sacrament she refers to her interviews with women in pastoral roles within the Roman Catholic Church who made a distinction between the "official" definition and their own "experiential" understanding of a sacrament (2001, p. 74). She cites two examples, one of which describes the celebration of a Hispanic girl's fifteenth birthday which did not fall within the definition of an official sacrament but was considered by her interviewee as a "sacramental moment" (2001, p. 212)

In the second example Ross describes the way in which a pastoral team worked with members of their community to prepare for an infant's baptism which led to a belief that it was "not really accurate to say that the 'real' sacrament occurred only in the church ceremony; [but] rather, [that] the whole process was understood to be part of the sacramental event" (2001, p. 212).

Based on the central claim of theology that “women image the divine in the embodied reality of their daily lives including the bodily changes and processes [such as] ... birth [and] sexual activity” (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998, p. 79) I would argue that the transition into motherhood that a woman experiences is a process that can also be interpreted as a “sacramental event” during which a number of “sacramental moments” are possible.

Sacramental because although I believe that God is present in everything, we do not experience God as *equally* present in everything (Macquarrie, 1997). However, I would suggest that the transition into motherhood is a particularly fertile period for sacramental moments, such as the special nature of the time around childbirth which has the potential to be experienced as an “opening [of] a door to the sacred” (Ross, 2001, p. 74).

Based on Ross’ understanding of sacramentality I would also go on to suggest that if the transition into motherhood is accompanied by the kind of ritualizing that I have described within this thesis, then aspects of the whole process contribute towards it being a sacramental event.

The gathering of women at Mother Blessings or the bonding of people through the birth event itself moves the experience away from being a purely individualistic encounter with God to one that is shared by a community (Ross, 2001, p. 37). Through the story of Jesus we are able to understand the birth event more fully, as a moment of incarnation (2001, p. 38) and the potential for justice (2001, p. 40), as I have already mentioned, is implicit in the ritualizing of experiences within a society that does very little to honour motherhood in this way.

Finally, Ross writes about the way in which the sacraments, in the experience of the women she interviewed were not neat entities, but messy and ambiguous (2001, p. 217). Ross suggests that this shows a maturity in which the complexity of people’s lives were honoured. Thus, by suggesting that the transition into motherhood can be understood as a sacramental event, I am not pretending that it is a simple process.

Rather than offering an orderly sacrament of baptism in the midst of a transition riddled with chaos and emotional upheaval, I am suggesting that the journey itself should be understood as a sacramental event during which sacramental moments occur and people are empowered to ritualize their experiences in order to be better able to mark, navigate and interpret them as such.

7.10 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced the idea that the transition into motherhood and the experience of childbirth were connected with spirituality. I then explored healthcare literature in which this concept has recently been recognised and contrasted it with theological literature in which the idea of a woman's journey into motherhood having an impact on her spirituality has largely been ignored.

I then explored my research data using Slee's three fold model to analyse patterns within my research participant's spirituality triggered by their experience of transition. The feeling of alienation was a common theme which ran throughout the stories within my research data and I have argued that the concept of awakening, whilst not always recognised as such by the women themselves, played a role in their decisions to ritualize their experiences.

Thirdly I explored the theme of relationality alongside my research data through which I was able to explore examples of the way in which the women's experiences prompted changes in their relationships. Of particular interest is the way in which this process highlighted the importance of the retelling of birthing stories.

I concluded this chapter with a theological reflection in which I contrasted the two scenarios of birth and baptism which helped me to introduce issues and ideas that go beyond what my research data explicitly says but to where I sense it points, particularly in relation to my understanding of the birthing event itself as sacred.

In conclusion this chapter emphasises the significance of the impact that a woman's transition into motherhood can have upon her spirituality. By exploring the concept of a sacrament I was also able to suggest that the women's ritualizing should not only be understood as attempts to navigate a rite of passage but also as ways of marking, capturing and creating sacramental moments during a journey that can be interpreted as a sacramental event.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Epilogue

After the birth narratives Mary slips into the background with her few recorded appearances only mentioned to emphasise Jesus' divinity.

When he goes missing at the age of twelve it is said that she does not understand. At the Wedding at Cana she appears to push Jesus forward before he believes that he is ready, and later, when the family send him a message whilst he is teaching, he seems to distance himself from them.

Along with her presence at the foot of the cross, all of these appearances echo the traditional patterns of motherhood which see a woman's body only as a vessel through which children are born and her life merely as a background from which they must separate themselves in order to successfully mature.

However, whilst these stories also reflect some of the tensions within motherhood, the gift of holding and letting go; and evoke some of the emotions that mothering involves, those of loving and grieving, there are other elements within Mary's story that can be interpreted differently.

After a number of Mary's appearances we are told that she ponders on the events that have taken place in much the same way as the women in my research sample took time of reflect upon their experiences.

According to the book of Acts, Mary was also present amongst a small group of Jesus' followers who met together to pray after his resurrection. Rather than Mary's story ending at the foot of the cross in a pitiful image of grief, this appearance moves the narrative on to suggest that she believed in the possibility of a relationship with her son beyond that which she had hitherto known.

Thus, within what we know of Mary's story we can see connections between her experiences and elements of the transition into motherhood that other women face. Her story can also be seen to symbolize the importance of transformation that lies at the heart of a mother's relationship with her child.

8.1 Introduction

Over the course of this thesis I have argued that the journey into motherhood through childbirth is a significant time of transition within a woman's life cycle. I have highlighted some of the discrepancies between women's experience of this journey and van Gennep's model but with these limitations in mind I still maintain that to think of a woman's transition into motherhood as a rite of passage helps to emphasise its importance. I have also explored a number of contemporary examples of women's ritualizing to show the ways in which they helped individuals to negotiate and interpret the many different experiences of their transition.

In this final chapter I draw the different threads of my thesis together in order to consider some of the potential implications for those involved in the pastoral care and spiritual support of women during this time, both within the church and for chaplains working in a healthcare setting. I conclude this chapter by picking up the narrative thread that I introduced at the beginning of my thesis to explain the impact that this research journey has also had on me.

8.2 Potential Implications for the Church

The first point regarding the church's response to the pastoral care of women during their transition into motherhood is that each woman and every birthing should be understood to be unique. An epistemology that rejects the assumption of a commonality of women's experience has become a prominent commitment within recent feminist research (Slee, 2004), and its importance was also highlighted by my own data.

Even within my small group of interview participants there was a wide range of different experiences and the women did not necessarily follow the same patterns of ritualizing for each birthing. Instead, their ritual activities were shaped by practical considerations as well as the particular nature of each experience. This has important implications for the way in which the church should respond to the pastoral needs of women during this time.

Rather than introducing a single liturgy for example, I would advocate the development of a range of resources that could be made available through the churches, focusing on different elements of the *whole* journey into motherhood. In line with other liturgies that are available I would also suggest that the resources are inclusive of the many different routes into motherhood that are possible.

Although this was purposefully not the focus of my research, such inclusivity would avoid any implication that one way into motherhood is more special or difficult than any other. It would also potentially raise awareness of some of the issues and challenges of other motherhoods such as surrogacy, step parenthood or conception through IVF. Some reflective theological literature already exists on some of these issues (Walton, 2003; Neu, 2003) but to gather these resources together, under the specific heading of motherhood, would make them more accessible to a wider audience.

However, by suggesting that the church should offer a range of resources I am not seeking to imply that all women feel the need to ritualize their experience or that every element of a woman's journey should be marked. Rather, I think that resources need to be made available to women on a range of issues which can then be used as appropriate, which brings me on to a second, related point, which is the importance of listening.

The idea of listening to women's birth stories is a theme that has run throughout this thesis, from my experience in ministry and then my own need to tell my story, through to my listening to the interviewees and latterly the way in which birth narratives have become recognised as important within the healthcare sector. Whatever resources the church provides, these should always be accompanied by a ministry of listening to individual stories.

This could be done by a minister or a pastoral team but I would argue that an even more empowering experience could be achieved through the creation of story circles, similar to the supportive, healing spaces created by the Women in Theology group, described by Aldcroft (1993).

This style of group listening, which has a strong tradition in feminist circles (Morton, 1985), could provide the space and support that women need to tell their birth stories. In the context of a church playgroup for example, informal friendship groups could be established between women during pregnancy, rather like the relationships that form within antenatal groups. These groups could then form the basis of a story circle within which women could be supported and encouraged to express their stories.

Unlike the NHS antenatal groups that tend to focus on the practicalities of childbirth and early motherhood, church based groups would focus on exploring the spiritual aspects of the journey both before and after birth. In recognising that this is not a feature of NHS provision however I also want to acknowledge that spirituality and the creation of rituals do feature within some already established, independent groups, such as the Norwich Birth Group mentioned by Ali, and Birth Art Cafés.²⁸ Any provision for the pastoral and spiritual support of women during their transition into motherhood offered by churches should therefore be done in collaboration rather than competition with other such ventures, where they exist.

In fact, one of the important features of the Birth Art Café concept is their focus on art as a means of communication. I recognise the importance of finding alternative means of expression for birth stories from my own research findings. As I have already mentioned, I often sensed a tension whilst in ministry and during some of the interviews between a woman's need to tell her story and her reluctance to share it more publicly. I am also mindful of the difficulties that Sered's research highlighted (1991) for women to find words to express the spirituality of their experiences and Aldcroft's (1993) point that birth experiences can reactivate painful memories for some women, of earlier abuse.

Thus, any story circle group needs to experiment with a range of ways to communicate, although the general premise to support women to explore their

²⁸ The concept of Birth Art Cafés was established by Tamara Donn, a childbirth educator from Kings Langley. More information can be found at www.birthartcafe.co.uk

stories and find ways to express them remains. Within the context of such a group I would also suggest that rituals could be introduced or created, and a language to express the spirituality of women's experiences of transition could naturally evolve.

Of course, the time and energy constraints particularly of early motherhood that I have previously mentioned would still exist, but within some church communities the involvement of other women, particularly older women might be possible. Indeed, Fenton suggests the idea of continuing the tradition of 'gossips'²⁹ to help with the care of children and to support new mothers in order to help them to feel less isolated.

In the context of increasing mobility and the geographical dispersion of families, the day to day intergenerational support of new mothers and their children by relatives is often no longer possible. The regular meeting of a church based group could provide a continuity of care that I have previously mentioned was felt to be lacking in the experience of some of my research participants. Pastoral care offered by older women, as well as the practical support that such a network could provide for one another, such as the provision of frozen meals when a new mother returns from hospital or the creation of a baby sitting circle could also be beneficial.

Finally, I want to emphasise my view that the issue of whether a child should be baptised is entirely separate to the point that I am making. Over the course of this thesis I have given examples of the wide diversity of experiences that make up a woman's rite of passage into motherhood. Whilst I believe that it is good practice to acknowledge the changes in relationship that have occurred as a consequence of the birth of a baby, the transition into motherhood is too important and complex to be properly dealt with in the context of baptism.

In summary, there is huge potential for churches to offer pastoral care and spiritual support for women during their transition into motherhood, but this must be done

²⁹ The original word 'gossip' meant 'god-siblings' and was used to refer to the women who attended a woman's Rite of Churching and the gossiping afterwards (Warner, 1994, p. 60).

with an understanding that every woman is an individual and each birthing is unique. Rather than offering any single liturgy, a range of resources needs to be made available alongside a ministry of listening, through which women can be pastorally cared for, as well as potentially empowered to explore, express and ritualize their experiences.

8.3 Potential Implications for Chaplains within a Healthcare Setting

Chaplains have an important and distinctive contribution to make to the ongoing discourse within the healthcare sector regarding the spirituality of childbearing women (Callister, 2010), the importance of birth narratives (Hall & Taylor, Birth and Spirituality, 2004), and concerns about difficulties in both articulating spirituality (Sered, 1991) and in equipping healthcare professionals to deal with this aspect of a woman's journey (Crowther & Hall, 2015).

In a healthcare setting, this contribution must be offered as part of a multidisciplinary team, where all aspects of a woman's health and wellbeing are considered. Within this framework, the understanding of the transition into motherhood as a rite of passage is the common ground. A chaplain's responsibility for the spiritual care of patients and staff (Hospital Chaplaincies Council, 2013) implies that they have a role to play not only in supporting staff to engage with the spiritual dimension of the childbirth experience, but also in providing resources for women undergoing this transition.

Clearly, any attempt to cater for the spiritual needs of women during their rite of passage into motherhood should be done with an awareness of what provision might already exist within the community as I mentioned in the previous section. However, in areas where there is no provision there are a number of ways in which a hospital chaplaincy team might be able to offer support to women.

A session could be incorporated into local NHS antenatal groups to introduce and explore the concept that the birth of a baby is also an important rite of passage within a woman's life cycle. An ideas sheet could be offered as part of these

sessions to help women to mark and navigate their journey such as introducing the idea of holding a Mother Blessing or inviting friends and family to light a candle when a woman goes into labour.

Resources could also be developed and made available for women to help them to engage and reflect upon their transition. Short meditations could be produced and distributed in the style of prayer cards that specifically focus on a woman's rite of passage into motherhood. Reflective story telling sessions³⁰ could also be held.

The involvement of chaplains within this setting would also have the effect of raising their profile as a pastoral resource for women during their time on a maternity unit, rather than being thought of as exclusively available for religious people or only called upon when an emergency baptism or funeral are requested.

In all of this, and alongside an interdisciplinary approach, the multicultural makeup of an area must be taken into account. Similarly the economic background of women should also be considered. Despite the limitations of my research sample being small and focused on women who all shared a similar background to my own, my research has an important contribution to make to the potential provision of any resources to support the spiritual and pastoral care of women during this time. In many contexts however, it can only be considered as a starting point, from which I hope a more inclusive approach can evolve.

In summary, healthcare chaplains are in a unique position to be able to contribute to the current awareness within research literature coming out of midwifery, of the importance of a woman's spirituality during her transition into motherhood, and the associated implications for pastoral care. A body of resources that reflects the cultural and religious beliefs of the local population would also help to provide women with material with which to ritualize and reflect upon their transitions.

³⁰ One style that could be adapted is that of Godly Play where participants are encouraged to engage with a Biblical story and 'wonder' about its meaning as well as the way in which it relates to their own life. For more information, go to www.godlyplay.org

8.4 My own Epilogue

I feel a sense of hypocrisy, that I have done very little to ritualize my own rite of passage into motherhood in any of the creative or imaginative ways that the women I interviewed described, as well as a sense of regret, but I also recognise the role that this research journey has played in enabling me to reflect upon, and work through various aspects of my transition.

Since the day that I posted my initial research proposal and discovered through a scan at the hospital that I was pregnant with twins, these two distinct strands of my life have interwoven, one sometimes overwhelming the other but also often informing and always challenging. To the point that I can now not only recognise the way in which my experiences of becoming a mother have informed my research but also the way in which my research has helped to shape my motherhood.

Within this process, I can also detect some of patterns that Slee (2004) has identified as being part of women's faith development. The impetus for my research grew out of the sense of alienation that I felt through my hospitalised birthing experience and my frustration that I could not find any resources within the Christian tradition to help me to deal with the fallout from this experience.

Aspects of awakening have occurred many times over the last few years as I've listened to other women's stories and read more widely about the transition into motherhood. It has also occurred as a consequence of my being part of the two women's research groups that I have previously mentioned. Through the friendships and support that I have found within them as well as from the challenges to my thinking that I have experienced in late night conversations over a glass of wine, as well as through worship, more formal seminars and discussions.

Most notably these experiences of alienation and awakening have prompted me to begin a tentative move away from my previous understanding of the Christian tradition as this extract from a relatively recent journal entry indicates:

I grew up strongly influenced by a liberal theology which gave me a set of clearly defined beliefs. It was as if I was looking through the viewfinder of a kaleidoscope which saw theology and faith in a certain way. As I grew older I found that some of these images became slightly distorted, or the edges began to get a little bit blurred as I shifted my position but the main images were still intact and most of the colours that I had grown up with remained.

Through my research journey and my related life cycle transition of becoming a mother some of those images have shattered. There have been times when I have metaphorically thrown my kaleidoscope to the other side of the room like a petulant child, buried it, sat on it or simply chosen not to look. Without my kaleidoscope I have experienced long periods of darkness and in that darkness I have felt frustration, anger and grief in equal measure.

More recently however, mainly through reading accounts of other feminists' journeys I have dared to pick up my kaleidoscope again and I have begun to glimpse colours. Some of these colours have been new whilst others I recognise from the past. Of the new colours I have initially felt wary. I simply don't recognise them and I feel disorientated. Even the old colours are not the same as they used to be. Some have dimmed, whilst others have changed their shape, size or hue. Sometimes it all feels too much. I have looked around and nobody else around me seems to be looking into a kaleidoscope and those who are don't appear to be looking at the same thing as me.

But I also keep finding myself drawn back to look, to sneak a peek at the whirling, dancing shapes and patterns. Whilst the old images of my faith were mainly static, the new ones never stop moving. Flourishing into ever expanding patterns. I sense that I need to spend more time with them and that eventually I won't need my kaleidoscope any longer. That the light I need and the colours I see will not come from an external source but become embodied. Somehow, part of me, but also intimately connected with the rest of the world.

That thought scares me ... but I also know that I cannot go back.

In conclusion, over the last eight years I have been privileged to have been on a journey of discovery that has been personally transformative. I hope that as a consequence of this process, other women in the future, during their own transition into motherhood may also be empowered to recognise and express the spirituality and sacredness of this most ancient rite of passage.

Appendix 1: Interviewees and Sources of Data

NAME	INTERVIEW	FIELD NOTES	JOURNAL	PERSONAL COMMUNICATION	OTHER SOURCES	QR ³¹
JEMMA	✓	✓	✓	Email and transcribed phone call	Transcript from speech at her daughter's Naming Ceremony	
MONICA	✓	✓	✓	Email	Reference to a personal journal during interview	
MARIA	✓	✓	✓	Email	Reference to a personal journal during interview	
ELAINE	✓	✓	✓	Email	Reference to a personal journal during interview Transcript of Personal Journal	✓
RUTH	✓	✓	✓	Email and letter	Published article in a parenting magazine ³²	
JANET	✓	✓	✓	Email	Published prayers written whilst pregnant ³³	
EDNA	✓	✓	✓	Email		✓
ALI	✓	✓	✓	Email	Published accounts of 2 of her birthings on a Birth Group website ³⁴	✓
MIRANDA	✓	✓	✓	Email	Reference to a personal journal during interview	
JACKIE	✓	✓	✓	Email	Book including her birth experiences ³⁵	

³¹ Questionnaire sent out in the early days of my research, filled in at the time by three of the people I went on to interview.

³² (Weston, 2010)

³³ (Lees, 1994)

³⁴ (Chapman, My First Labour and the Birth of April, 2003) and (Chapman, 2005)

³⁵ (Singer, 2009)

Appendix 2: Pre-prepare-ing & Gathering Ritual Activities during Pregnancy

JEMMA: Doula

JANET: Writing Prayers ----- Holiday ----- Retreat

JACKIE: Birthing Partner ----- Mother Blessing ----- Gathering Resources

MONICA: Journaling ----- Maternity Blessing ----- Mother Blessing ----- Gathering Resources

MARIA: Mother Blessing ---- Gathering Resources

ALI: Doula ----- Journaling ----- Gathering Resources

ELAINE: Birthing Coach

RUTH: Doula ----- Gathering Resources

KEY:	Homemade Rituals	Remembered Moments	Marked Moments	---	Denotes ritual sequences
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Appendix 3: Wombing & Cocooning Ritual Activities around Birth

MARIA: Personalized Space ----- Bubble

JACKIE: Personalized Space ----- Doula³⁶

MONICA: Personalized Space ----- Happy ----- Welcoming

ALI: Personalized Space ----- Doula³⁶ ----- Lying In^{37**}

RUTH: Personalized Space ----- Doula³⁶ ----- Thankful ----- Lying In

JANET: Naming

ELAINE: Doula³⁶ ----- Welcoming ----- Mother's Visit

KEY:	Homemade Rituals	Remembered Moments	Marked Moments	---	Denotes ritual sequences
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³⁶ I have referred to Doulas for simplicity but this category includes all other females from whom the women sought extra support during labour including Homeopaths, Independent Midwives and Birthing Partners

³⁷ Also referred to by Ali as a Babymoon

Appendix 4: Remembering & Emerging Ritual Activities beyond Birth

JEMMA: (Telling of Story)

ALI: Wellbeing Tray ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ (Reflecting & Praying)

EDNA: Reflection Ritual

MIRANDA: Naming Ritual ----- Counselling ----- Acupuncture + Massage ----- Journaling

ELAINE: Story Ritual ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

JANET: Planting vegetables ~ ~ ~ ~ Retreats ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Writing ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Holiday ~ ~ ~ ~

KEY:	Homemade Rituals	Remembered Moments	Marked Moments	--- Denotes ritual sequences
()	Refers to moments that occurred within another homemade ritual			~ ~ ~ Denotes repeated ritualizing

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