Spirituality and Ageing:
The Spiritual Narratives of Contemporary Older Australians

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Abstract

The current research interest in spirituality and ageing is in part driven by the need to debate the increasing social and economic impact of ageing populations in Western societies. Australia is actively participating in these debates that in part, discuss the productive role that spirituality might assume for older Australians. However recent scholarship has provided limited data about the specific features of older Australians’ spirituality. Moreover the relevance of current disciplinary discourses of spirituality in terms of the spiritual experiences of older individuals also remains largely untested in the literature. This study seeks to address the research problem of the relative lack of data available on the accounts of spirituality of older contemporary Australian individuals and on the associated relevance of current disciplinary discourses of spirituality. The research problem is significant in that without evidence based accounts of the spiritual experiences of older Australians appropriately targeted future research, policy formulation and practices across a range of social contexts will be compromised or limited.

The older Australians in this study are a self-selected sample; they are aged 65 and over; and have identified some personal experiences as spiritual. This study employs a qualitative interdisciplinary bricolage research design in association; (i) with Denzin’s interpretive interactionism to collect and analyse data over several encounters on the narrated spiritual experiences of these older Australians; and (ii) with the method of narrative literary criticism to establish thematic patterns in Scriptural narratives associated with the old protagonists of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna. The interpretive interaction study of contemporary narrated experiences reports significant new data which has been consolidated into a contemporary Australian cohort generated model of spirituality comprising content, sequence and dynamics as features. The narrative literary criticism study also makes a significant contribution to scholarship. It argues that thematic patterns associated with old age offer nuanced Scriptural discussions around the nature of human spirituality including the importance of an unmediated relationship with the Divine, and the co-creator relationship existing between the individual and their God in terms of moral creation. My research here extends existing interpretations of old age and spirituality in Biblical scholarship. Moreover, when these Biblical themes around old age are compared with those from the spiritual narratives of older Australians, the congruence of the two sets of spiritual narratives argues for the ongoing relevance of Biblical insights in a contemporary context.
Conceptually this study is significant in that it analyses and synthesizes discourses of spirituality from selected social sciences with theological disciplinary knowledge associated with Schneiders’ scholarship on spirituality as an academic discipline. One outcome of this synthesis is a Framework of Spirituality based on a shared understanding of spirituality as a complex and broadly conceived phenomenon. This framework is employed to argue congruence and articulation between the accounts of spiritual experiences of older individuals and the disciplinary discourses of spirituality used to investigate spirituality in contemporary research. This advances theories of ageing and spirituality found in scholars such as Jung and Tornstam into the Australian context. Similarly this evidence based view of spirituality challenges an understanding of spirituality which is narrowly defined in terms of orthodox theological statements; and reflects concerns over the limitations of quantitative analyses of spirituality. This interdisciplinary analysis of discourses of knowledge on spirituality is supported by the innovative use of a bricolage research design.

This study’s findings make an important contribution to research into spirituality and ageing within the Australian context. First, the research conceptually synthesizes interdisciplinary discourses on spirituality that require spirituality to be understood as a complex phenomenon. Second, major advances are made in terms of new evidence based data and modelling on the spiritual experiences of older Australians. Third, advances are similarly made with regard to re-contextualizing applicable disciplinary scholarship on spirituality with the spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians. Hence the currency and relevance of research and future research which understands spirituality as a complex and broadly conceived phenomenon are secured. Fourth, the findings suggest that a range of community based practices and ministries with a focus on older Australians need to review their approaches in the light of this research in order to exclude deficit models of ageing and to support the older individual’s ongoing personal or spiritual development.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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When this study commenced my parents – now both deceased - were alive. I told them that I was about to undertake research into spirituality to which my father who was in the end stages of MS, replied with a chuckle, “Oh, that’s just rubbish!” And so he remained a determined and courageous sceptic to the end. My mother who was always an open and intuitive individual responded to the news with, “Well, there may be something in it.” The intelligence and warmth with which they supported any of my efforts over a lifetime remain an ongoing and sustaining memory.

Specifically, this study is the outcome of a six year conversation with Dr Anne Dawson. As my principal supervisor she was patient and supportive both in terms of her willingness to explore unorthodox ideas and in terms of her academic scholarship around spirituality. There are however, others whom I wish to thank in relation to the research. Dr Sarah Rickson as my associate supervisor strengthened the study with her observations about narrative methodologies as well as with her expertise in social science theories and practices. Dr Eric Williams was this study’s critical friend. His own PhD studies with Norman Denzin led to the crucial suggestion that interpretive interactionism was an appropriate methodology for collecting and analysing the spiritual narratives of this study. He actively supported my work throughout its conduct. In a similar manner Keith Parker also supported my research. His debates around the literary critical readings of the selected Biblical narratives encouraged insights and refinements to my Scriptural analyses during the final period of the study’s development.

The duration of this study also coincided with the publication under my family name of my three books about aged care, including numerous editions of these books. *The Australian Carer* (Croft 2013), *Caring in the Community* (Croft 2010), and *The Experienced Carer* (Croft 2015) provided a sympathetic backdrop to my research into spirituality and ageing. Sophie Kalinieki from Cengage and Elise Carney from Pearson allowed me to re-set timelines on occasions in order to focus more freely on my research. I gratefully thank them for this consideration.

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Helen Parker
Dedication

for

Sarah Parker
Technical Preface

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The Referencing Style used in this thesis is Harvard AGPS. Griffith’s Referencing Tool was used as a guide to the use of the Harvard AGPS style.

So what is spiritual? It leaves you with good feelings not bad ones? When I go to Caulfield Racecourse I get good feelings. Almost every year my partner and I go to the Caulfield Cup over the Spring Carnival. The weather is typically beautiful, the gardens are a gorgeous display of colour and greenery, and the horses are simply magnificent creatures. Added to this beauty is the fact that my Dad’s ashes are scattered near this racecourse. I know he loved me and so perhaps that love is also what I am feeling there at this time of year.

- Participant 6
1

Introduction to the Study

1.1 Introduction

With increasing age, contemplation, and reflection, the inner images naturally play an ever greater part in man’s life. “Your old men shall dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28) That to be sure, presupposes that the psyches of the old men have not become wooden, or entirely petrified … In old age one begins to let memories unroll before the mind’s eye and, musing, to recognise oneself in the inner and outer images of the past. …This is like a preparation for an existence in the hereafter, just as, in Plato’s view, philosophy is a preparation for death.

The inner images keep me from getting lost in personal retrospection. Many old people become too involved in the reconstruction of past events. They remain imprisoned in these memories. But if it is reflective and is translated into images, retrospection can be a reculer pour mieux sauter. I try to see the line which leads through my life into the world and out of the world again. (Jung 1967, pp. 351–352)

The connection between ageing and spirituality has become an important area of study and research in recent years. A number of researchers have developed theories of human psychological development where spirituality in old age relates to stages of human psychological development (Erikson, Erikson & Kivnik 1986; Tornstam 1995, 2005). Other researchers have proposed that individuals who are engaged with their spiritual natures tended to age happily and enjoyed good health (Atchley 2006, Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010). On one hand these theories and findings were paralleled by the uptake of ageing and spirituality by the New Age spiritual movement (Drury 2004). On the other hand, those who care for aged persons in the Australian community are encouraged and trained to support older individuals in expressing their spiritual needs.¹

¹ The practically focused vocational training course for aged care workers in Australia, for example, has a compulsory unit entitled “Support the older person to meet their emotional and psychosocial needs”. This unit includes major outcomes in terms of supporting the spiritual beliefs and practices of older persons (Croft 2013).
But is this as far as researchers need to venture? If the opening insight provided by Jung in his autobiography is reflected on, the connection between the inner life of the spirit and ageing appears to present the individual with unique potential. At the end of life, individuals can continue to open themselves to new challenges and rewards predicated upon reflectively accessing their past in which is gathered up inner experiences as well as those of material life, together with the emotions and values attached to them. Certainly a number of researchers are seeking to extend an understanding of the ageing-spirituality nexus by examining issues around how individuals continue to extend their life stories and personal development up to and until the final period of their lives (Randall 2012; Bohlmeijer et al 2011). Other research studies, for example, those conducted by Kaldor, Hughes & Black (2010) not only focus on the individual and personal. This area of social science research has found that the broader community is directly engaged as participants in and beneficiaries of the ageing-spirituality dynamic—both from the perspective of personal and community enhancement. Disciplinary scholarship associated with theological research and studies also has been seeking to extend an understanding of spirituality (Schneiders 1997, 2000, 2002, 2011, 2013), as well as old age from the perspective of Biblical exegesis (Harris 2008). Scholarship situated both in the social sciences and in theological studies therefore has been focused on increasing such esoteric or disciplinary knowledge (Singh 2002, p. 575) about spirituality. (Singh defines esoteric or disciplinary knowledge as “the knowledge constituted in scientific research communities, literary and artistic organizations”).

The aim of this study is to use interdisciplinary perspectives to explore the accounts of spirituality narrated by older Australians aged 65 and over, and the articulation of these narrated spiritual experiences with Biblical spiritual narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. This aim seeks to address the research problem of the relative lack of data available on the accounts of the spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australian individuals and on the articulation with Biblical spiritual narratives and with interdisciplinary scholarship on spirituality. This research is significant, firstly because it provides and extends data, evidence and modelling concerning the spirituality of contemporary older Australians; and secondly because it provides and extends data and evidence on how the spirituality of contemporary older Australians articulates with Biblical spiritual narratives and disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. The study is also significant because the analysis which argues for the articulation of the spirituality of contemporary older Australians with Biblical spiritual narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on
spirituality re-contextualizes such Biblical and disciplinary scholarship on spirituality and ageing for their contemporary relevance.

### 1.2 The research questions

The study addresses the following three research questions:

**Research Question 1:**
What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

**Research Question 2:**
What are the thematic elements in the Biblical narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

**Research Question 3:**
Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

By way of initial clarification, the thesis will largely limit its enquiry into spirituality and old age within the broad context of Western culture and Christianity as a culturally shaping force within Western society.

### 1.3 Clarifying the research problem - defining key concepts

In order to clarify the research problem, the following sections define “older individual”/“old age” and “spirit”/“spirituality” in the context of first, the contemporary spiritual narratives; and second, the Biblical narratives associated with Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna.

#### 1.3.1 “Older individual”, “older Australian”, “old age”, “ageing”

“Aged”/“ageing”: for the purposes of this thesis, the term “aged”/“ageing” relates to the life period covered by 65+ years in Western societies, and by the period of “elder”-hood in other communities. In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics uses this benchmark for its demographic and associated studies (ABS 2013). In Australia, 65 years has also been the age
marker for accessing the Aged Pension benefit, although this has now officially risen to 67 years. Similarly, the associated terms of “old age” and “aged” refer to individuals or circumstances associated with individuals whose age is in excess of 65 years. By way of further clarification, “ageing” in the context of this study refers to the situational circumstance of inhabiting over time the demographic space of 65+ years.

For the purposes of this study in terms of the contemporary spiritual narratives, this definition of “old age” works effectively to establish the boundary around an appropriate population of older individuals. It does so because it provides a bridge for associated research and comparison purposes with a major body of current peer reviewed and scholarly research around old age in Western societies (Zebhauser et al 2014, , Krause &Hayward 2012, Alpass & Paddison 2014, Borg, Hallborg & Blomquist 2006).

There are other definitional approaches to “old”, “old age”, “aged” and “ageing”. MacKinlay, for example, argues strongly against using chronological settings for discussions around age and ageing. She argues that this “confines older people to stereotypic expectations according to age” (MacKinlay 2004, p. 44). Instead of chronological boundaries, MacKinlay chooses the terms “Third Age” and “Fourth Age” to describe older individuals. In so doing, she appears to reference and modify Laslett’s (1994) model of the four ages of a Western individual’s life. An individual in the “Third Age” is 65 years and older, well, living independently in the community, and “draw[s] meaning from life by doing” (MacKinlay 2004, p. 33). A person in the “Fourth Age” is not living independently in the community and “often has multiple chronic illnesses and lacks the energy to engage more actively with life” (ibid.). MacKinlay’s definitional approach to “old age”/“ageing” appropriately establishes the boundaries for her research. However, she cannot avoid merely shifting the ageing stereotype from the “chronological age” benchmark to that of “wellness-and-living in the community”. Over half the participants of my present study, for example, were over 80 years old and living in an aged care facility, and several had chronic conditions. However, their spiritual narratives reveal an engagement with life as vital as anyone living independently in the community.

Other critics of benchmarking “old”, “old age”, “aged”, “ageing” in fact go further than MacKinlay. Donald Capps (2012) argues against the “iconic illusion” of ageing, where individuals rise to a peak of performance or activity and then decline into old age and loss of capacities. He argues against working with the current stereotype of old age and instead argues for working at recognising and changing the culturally powerful view of the
stereotypical ageing pattern. This, he contends, will lead to a re-balancing of the contemporary cultural understanding of the losses and gains associated with ageing. Capps’ and Pryser’s views can be given personal and autobiographical support in articles and reflections by individuals in their eighties. For example, Sheelah Egan (2012, pp. 19–22) clearly expresses her dissatisfaction with approaches to pastoral care for older persons (including herself at 80 years old) – “the attempts were theoretical and tended to be based on stereotypes lacking authenticity” (2012, p. 19).

The 65+ years benchmark for “old age”/“ageing” then, is not without its critics. Nonetheless, for the purposes of providing a reference point for this study in the context of the Australian community, the 65+ years old demographic group will be the focus of discussion. However, as a final observation which looks forward to the findings of the thematic analysis of the spiritual narratives provided by older individuals, I argue that this study also challenges the deficit models of ageing and old age which concern researchers such as MacKinlay (2004), Capps (2011) and Egan (2012). Whether the older individuals who provided their spiritual narratives are 65 or 100, and regardless as to whether they live independently in the community or in a nursing home, their positive engagement in life is clearly evidenced in their spiritual narratives.

Biblical narratives - “old”, “old age”, “aged”, “ageing”

Unlike contemporary research into old age and ageing, Biblical scholarship does not generally concern itself with specific definitional age benchmarks as to when an individual may be identified as old. Barclay (2007), for example, explores the sociological issue of old age in 1st century Palestine as being situated around 40 years old and so raises interpretive issues around relocating perceptions of old age in the New Testament to the modern environment. Because my study is concerned with symbolic relationships and narrative themes, this sociological perspective of old age will not feature in my analysis.

Another aspect of old age that Barclay examines is its Biblical use in dualistic pairings – “old” and “new”. In early Christianity, the Christian message and movement was “new” as opposed to the “old” Mosaic Law and established Judaism. Barclay argues that this dichotomy was exploited to promote the Christian message during the early days of the Christian movement. In fact, the use of “old” in dichotomous pairings is a theme of the Scriptures overall. In particular, “old/wise” and “old/enfeebled” are viewed as major themes in terms of the Bible’s treatment of old age (Knight 2014; Cohen 2010). As a theme, this
dichotomous relationship is significant for my study and will be discussed in Chapter 4, but in this pairing there is no sense of a given benchmark age. Specific ages are of course mentioned in Genesis, where genealogical lines of long-lived individuals are named, along with a record of their specific age and the claim to have sired many sons and daughters. Horn (2014) associates these long-lived individuals with an early Genesis prefiguring of the promise of resurrection. For the purposes of this study, however, the stated great ages of the pre-Abrahamic generations will be understood as a device for populating the future nation of Israel and so no specific age benchmark will be taken from it. (This is not in any way to discount Horn’s insight into the potential connection between extreme old age and the promise of resurrection in the Scriptures.)

The definition of “old age”/“ageing” employed for the participants in the contemporary story-telling would apply to the old protagonists of the key Scriptural narratives under consideration – Abraham is 75 when he departs the family group, Job and his “old” companions are contrasted with the “young” Elihu, Simeon has passed beyond old age but cannot die, and Anna is 104 years old. Their narratives are the spiritual stories of “old” Biblical individuals. In terms of providing an “old age” reference point, the definitions outlined earlier can apply for the Biblical analyses.

1.3.2 “Spirituality”, “spiritual experiences”

Spirit and spirituality are difficult concepts to capture (Wiseman 2006). In fact, many discussions about spirituality commence with this kind of acknowledgement. The “term spiritual however, needs to remain elusive if it is not to betray its very identity” (Bellamy 1998 p. 185). Robinson (2008) challenges this approach but then launches a partisan attack on theologians by claiming that it is their “favourite game” to deny a meaning for spirituality in order to claim “that the only substantive meaning can be found within the traditions of religion” (Robinson 2008, p. 54). As I argue at a later point, the work on spirituality undertaken by academic theologians such as Schneiders (1989, 2000, 2011) challenges this prejudice.

1.3.2.1 Disciplinary discourses of spirituality

Scholarly discourses of spirituality focus on disciplinary knowledge. My thesis problem concerns the spiritual experiences of older contemporary individuals which are captured through narrative accounts; and how these narratives articulate with disciplinary discourses
of spirituality. In part the difficulty of defining spirituality arises from the many points of intersection which comprise the discourses of spirituality. By discourses here I refer to Foucault’s definition, “Whatever signifies or has meaning can be considered part of discourse. Meanings are ‘embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behaviour, in forms of transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms’ (Foucault in Macdonell 1986, p. 4).” Examples of these intersection points are spirituality and Aboriginal peoples’ social and emotional wellbeing (Poroch et al 2009), spirituality and art therapy (Rappaport 2009), spirituality and corporate social responsibility (Berry 2013), spirituality and counselling (Hyson 2013), spirituality and ethics in management (Zsolnai ed. 2011), spirituality and gender (Colgrove 2007), spirituality and health (Benson 1997), spirituality and palliative care (Koenig 2013), spirituality and personhood in dementia (Jewell 2011), spirituality and recovering from pathological gambling (Clarke 2006), spirituality and social work (Crisp 2009), spirituality and sport (Parry et al 2007), spirituality in a secular world and exploration of spiritual life stories (McColl 1989), spirituality of comedy (Hyers 1996), spirituality and leadership (Hawkins 1991), spirituality in the workplace (Trott 2013), spirituality and ethics (Puchalski 2009) and spirituality and nursing (Highfield 1992). A similar set of examples is provided by Deagan and Pendergast (2012 p. 4) as they sought definitional clarity around “spirituality” in the area of spiritual health and well-being. Such variations associated within discourses of spirituality create definitional difficulties.

**Disciplinary discourses of spirituality - social science scholarship**

**Quantitative versus qualitative approaches to defining spirituality**

This study’s argument is that spirituality and its associated terms are both difficult to define and difficult to define narrowly. This finds support in the largely failed efforts of quantitative analysis to investigate the field. In recent peer-reviewed studies, we find Meezenbroek et al.’s (2010) research into the reliability of spirituality questionnaires, where all questionnaires failed to meet the set criteria for measuring spirituality. An important study by Aird (2007) provides an exhaustive study of the research undertaken to quantitatively link spirituality (often conflated with religion) with a range of health and wellbeing outcomes. She observes the potentially compromised nature of such research, given “the lack of conceptual consistency across studies that have investigated these relationships in recent years” (Aird 2007, p. 86). While Aird does not resile from the ongoing usefulness of quantitative research into discussing spirituality and its relationship to a range of health and psychological issues, she observes that “(Q)ualitative approaches and methods such as participant observation, ethnography, focus groups, content analysis, and interviews hold
great potential for elucidating the mechanisms that may explain the associations observed in this study” (Aird 2007, p. 209). The implication for defining both spirituality and religion is: the definitional approach needs to be broad rather than narrow. Aird’s research next addressed the difficulty of conflating religion and spirituality when it came to defining spirituality; and how spirituality was defined in qualitative research.

**Conflating religion and spirituality**

It appears that most recent research around spirituality attempts to make clear the distinction between religion and spirituality. This is done to acknowledge that “religion” works as a subset of spirituality. I will argue a similar position in the following discussion but this is done more in recognition that this is the common use in the peer-reviewed literature and in everyday parlance. However, as MacKinlay (2004, p. 45) notes, religion itself is a difficult term to define; and with the same caution, Aird (2007) suggests definitional efforts should not result in disenfranchising the term “religion” or necessarily privileging it over “spirituality”. A recent work by Russell Sandberg (2014) further discusses in detail the difficulties the law and other contemporary social institutions face when defining “religion”.

Without seeking then in any way to deny the many complexities and arguments around the definition of “religion”, any definition for the purposes of this study must be able to accommodate the common use of the term found in such statements as “I am a religious person” or “I don’t believe in religion” or “my religion is Christianity”. These are the kinds of everyday uses of the term “religion” to be found in the language of the spiritual narratives. Most of this common use of the term “religion” references a divine force (however conceptualised) and some form of institutional presence. To this common sense end therefore, this study will use the definition of “religion” provided by Steve Bruce, a leading sociologist of religion: “(R)eligion, then, consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of actions, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose” (Bruce 1995, p. ix). It is the concepts of divine entities and institutional constructs which typically allow “religion” to be narrowly and often pejoratively defined. It is not the purpose of this present study to follow this complex argument further. Suffice to observe that studies that conflate religion with spirituality also appear to define “religion” narrowly. When such narrow definitional usage occurs in the scholarly literature, this study will take the position that “spirituality” has greater breadth of conceptual reach. In this I agree with MacKinlay (2004, p. 51) “… I have decided to use
‘spirituality’ here as understanding of the term spirituality is broader than the term ‘religion’ in current use.”

**Spirituality from a qualitative social science perspective**

Support for an understanding of spirituality that is broadly defined emerges from an analysis of recently finalised PhD dissertations and recently published peer reviewed studies. These recently finalised PhD dissertations and recently published peer reviewed studies cover a wide range of research foci. These are critiqued only in terms of their definition of spirituality and are identified as follows. A **phenomenological focus**: Schmidt (2005) studied the phenomenological essence of spiritual leisure experiences. His work contained thoughtful analyses of the development of spirituality as a concept different to religion. He also considered that “spirituality remains a rather tenuous and singularly undefined term” (2005, p. 4). He decided however for the purposes of his study that spirituality was “a broad concept that refers to the ways in which people seek, make, celebrate, and apply meaning in their lives. This usually takes the form of a frame of reference wider than the immediate, the material and the everyday…and leads the believer to seek or experience a personal meaning in their own life” (2005, p. 5). The broad approach to defining spirituality was therefore evident in Schmidt’s thesis. A **philosophical focus**: Webster (2003) argued for an existential framework of spirituality for education. Webster’s study entailed a detailed review of contemporary concepts of spirituality. The study’s working concept rather than definition of spirituality commenced with the observation that “attempting to describe spirituality is a complicated task” (2005, p. 54) and that it “is a concept that many talk about but there has not been clear and generally accepted agreement as to what it is and is not” (2005, p. 55). The definitional outcome of his review was that spirituality “is argued to be a dimension that gives meaning and purpose to life, providing intention and an ethos in the way that one lives one’s life” (2005, p. 83). This definition of “spirituality” together with the associated review of scholarly material also placed itself in the territory of broad approaches to defining spirituality. A **social work focus**: Barker and Floersch (2010) argued that spirituality “defies specificity”. They saw spirituality as a term best approached as a meta-concept “best captured in the context of its varied dimensions” (2010, pp. 364-366). Hodge and Derezotes (2008) argued that spirituality was “nebulous” and defined through subjective and individualistic terms” (2008, p. 108). There were nonetheless a number of themes associated with the term. These were the existence of a transcendent reality; individual connection with the transcendent reality; and transformation of perception. An **education focus for professional faculties of business, education and social work** was found in Groen’s study.
Groen’s, 2009 article defined spirituality as “the human striving for a sense of meaningful fulfilment through morally satisfying relationships between individuals, communities, the surrounding universe and the ontological ground of our existence ... often spirituality is expressed in religious forms...however, spirituality may be expressed without adherence to a religion” (2009, p. 230). A business leadership focus was provided by Phipps (2012). Phipps observed the wide variety of definitions associated with spirituality. Phipps indicated definitional features of spirituality as connection to a transcendent being, an individual’s search for meaning and the realization of personal potential. These definitional features were argued to apply to spirituality in the workplace. Gregg (2011) provided a health focus: Gregg considered spirituality in terms of the coping strategies of black American women diagnosed with breast cancer. He specifically developed his definition in terms of the context of the study. For Gregg spirituality was a coping mechanism which included reading the Bible, attending prayer groups, and consulting shamans.

From the scholarship around the defining of spirituality, the following definitional issues have been identified:

1. Spirituality is difficult to define given the complex set of features and dynamics associated with the concept.
2. Spirituality as a term requires re-contextualisation in the “real life” context of its use.
3. Spirituality defies quantitative analysis where variables require narrow definition.
4. Spirituality is most usefully defined in a broad manner within qualitative research designs.
5. Spirituality, when defined broadly, contains the following themes:
   - existence of a transcendent reality
   - individual connection with the transcendent reality
   - personal transformation
   - individual search for meaning
   - morally framed relationships

This latter “definition” of spirituality, deploying as it does a broad approach, will contribute to the definition of spirituality to be adopted for the present study. By consolidating a definition from current scholarly material, “spirituality” as a concept has been re-contextualised for currency within selected disciplinary fields of social science. However, this study conducts its research in the shared dialogue space of selected social science research and theological research and study. Because of these contextual considerations relating to
the dissertation, emerging definitional features around spirituality found in current scholarship from Christian theological studies and research are also considered.

**Disciplinary discourses of spirituality – selected theological scholarship**

Theology is the formal cultural response to certain kinds of experiences which seek to place both the individual and community in a relationship with “the spiritual” regardless of whether “the spiritual” is envisaged as a God or some other posited transcendent reality. As a general observation the perspective taken on spirituality from a traditional Christian position requires a narrow or faith definition. As Gelfer (2009) claimed, contemporary Christian orthodox theology continued to assert specifically “that spirituality must refer to the life of the Christian and their relationship with the Divine” (Gelfer 2009, p. 8). The concept and role of spirituality in Christian theology has its own development and history stretching from the Middle Ages to the present day (Sheldrake 2007; Holder 2011, pp. 3-4). During this long period spirituality and its associated terms were bound into the formal theological architecture of the Christian Church.

The approach to spirituality articulated by the major Christian faith traditions continues to provide an important contemporary frame of reference for scholarship – particularly Biblical study as a source of divine revelation. Scholars from this tradition view spirituality as inextricably theologically grounded and associated with personal transformation and revelation within a given Christian faith tradition. Dorothy A. Lee is an Australian Johannine scholar of international significance (Maloney 2012, pp. 7-11), and Lee’s arguments about spirituality (Lee 2012) are used to illustrate this position. Lee dismisses “everyday” spirituality as an overused and de-valued term (2012 p. 9). Instead Lee argues that spirituality is definitionally linked to “identifiable religious life” and needs to be connected to “theology and religious text” (2012 p. 9). After linking appropriately defined spirituality to religious text, Lee continues to argue that spirituality as a legitimate object of Biblical study involves “engaging with systematic theology”. Lee clarifies that the study of authentic spirituality derived from the Biblical writings produces “several aspects of theology” (2012 p. 10) – “the incarnation, with its implications for understanding God, revelation and the human person (including cross and resurrection); human existence and its significance, lived

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2 I want to make a distinction here between the spirituality of orthodox Christianity and that of Pauline spirituality. The initial Pauline understanding of “spiritual” meant: living in a moral sense “under the influence of the Spirit of God” (Sheldrake 2007, p. 3). Pauline spirituality pre-dates the creedal and dogmatic developments around spirituality of the later orthodox Christian Church.
in the context of community; the incoming reign of God, already realised in Christ; and participation in the Triune life of God” (2012 p. 10). The observation on Lee’s definition made by this study is that she selectively limited the aspects of theology that were included in her defining formulation. She did not for example include theology around the role of Mary or the male-centric formulations which remained standing in much Christian theology.

Other recently published peer reviewed material addresses definitions of spirituality in the context of theological or pastoral/ministry research and study, but this theological scholarship largely does not employ a narrow, “faith” tradition definition of spirituality in its research. These research interests and the associated definition of spirituality of this scholarly material from these peer reviewed articles were analysed as follows. A religious education focus: Ivers’ (2010) studied the emergence of new discourses on religious education in Catholic schools in Brisbane. While he was concerned with developing a religious education policy framework which addressed providing students “with a spirituality appropriate for adolescents” (2010, p. 97) and which challenged students to “become people of justice and of deep spirituality” (2010, p. 149), Ivers provided no definition of “spirituality”. Grajconek’s study (2006) focused on religious education in Catholic pre-schools. She used a multi-method approach involving document analysis and classroom interaction analysis. Early in her discussions she grappled with the circumstance where policy, curriculum and classroom practice had to account for pre-schoolers from a pluralist community and a declared range of religious positions ranging from Catholic to no religious affiliation. This engaged her with a discussion about spirituality in the context of early childhood. Grajconek did not provide a definition of spirituality – rather she chose to employ an everyday understanding of the term. A pastoral focus: Snodgrass and Sorajjakool (2011) looked to supporting older persons’ spirituality as it related to the search for meaning and ongoing personal productivity. For their research purposes ‘spirituality” was defined by the 1971 White House Conference on Aging and Thibault’s (1995) work on spirituality. The definition was therefore broad and thematic. Spirituality here included (i) reference to inner resources; (ii) central values; (iii) a central philosophy of life; and (iv) transcendental aspects of human nature. The researchers also were clear that “spirituality is not limited to religious beliefs and practices” (2011, p. 86). A pastoral focus was also found in other scholars. Sandoz (2014) argued for finding God through the spirituality of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Sandoz provided no definition of spirituality. Chung (2010) provided a case study of the transforming role of spirituality in the traumatic experience of a Korean sex slave. Chung provided no definition of spirituality. Streets (2014) developed a pastoral care
and counselling philosophy with love at its core. He provided no discussion or definition around spirituality. A practical theology focus: Wolfteich (2009) argued that the lack of consensus around spirituality was healthy. She noted that she had provided a range of definitions of spirituality at different times in her work and concluded “the question of how we define spirituality is less an issue to be resolved and more a practical theological question for continual reflection, one that needs to be brought to our study of diverse contexts” (2009, p. 1 26). McClure was similarly practically oriented. McClure (2013) provided a rigorous analysis of how the sacred was to be discerned in contemporary life. She referenced the anthropological definitions of spirituality associated with the work of Sandra Schneiders. McClure’s definitional approach to spirituality was broad, viewed through an anthropological lens and argued for community context. Waaijman (2002) also attempted to provide a practical consolidated view to defining spirituality. He undertook this consolidation while acknowledging the considerable number of available definitions of spirituality. By Waaijman’s reckoning he identified 54 “forms” of spirituality (2002 p. 11) as he worked to bring them into focus around lay, institutional and countermovement spirituality. A Scriptural studies focus: This set of scholars and their perspectives on spirituality were of particular interest to my study given its comparative focus on the Biblical narratives. Dailey (1999) defined spirituality in terms of its transcendent and associated transformational nature. Barton (2010) avoided providing an orthodox Catholic or Protestant model of spirituality and like Schneiders defined spirituality broadly - “spirituality as I use it in this book has to do with the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that divine presence” (2010, p. 1). Lee (2012) provided commentary around defining spirituality in her 2012 study of spirituality in Johannine literature (2012). In the introduction to her study Hallowed in truth and love: spirituality in the Johannine literature Lee set the context for her study by dismissing contemporary references to spirituality. Because her position here represents a counter view this study’s arguments around spirituality and its shared context with selected social science and Biblical research; it is quoted in some detail:

In the confusion of meaning over the term ‘spirituality’, it may seem futile to write a book concerned with New Testament spirituality. In the popular view, in secular circles where ‘spirituality’ is part of a common vocabulary, there is no necessary connection to any identifiable religious life, Christian or otherwise. Its scope hardly seems to go beyond the notion of interior, individualistic well-being. Ideas of tradition or discipline are generally absent, as is involvement in religious ritual. Above all, such spirituality is disconnected from theology and religious text. As a consequence, some may conclude that to speak of spirituality at all is so broad a concept as to be meaningless; the word is corrupted by over-use and muddied by a loose and disconnected assortment of ideas (2012, p. 9).
My study disagrees with Lee’s position here. Lee creates an assumption of privilege around those who are able to move beyond “just subjective experience” (2012, p. 10), who practice a religious life (no definition of “religious life” is offered); who are educated in terms of theology and religious texts; and who are involved in religious ritual. No consideration is given to the circumstance into which those without such privilege are placed nor is there any sense of commitment to working with the spiritually under-privileged individuals’ “loose and disconnected assortment” of ideas around their spirituality discussions. This could be argued to be the creation of a “spiritual elite”. It runs counter to my research findings arising from (i) a documentation review of appropriately conducted research around spirituality in selected social sciences; and (ii) the spiritual narratives where thematic analysis of those findings reveal a spirituality which is rich, detailed, complex, and in sympathy with thematic data generated by my own Biblical analysis and that of scholars such as Barton. Moreover there is almost no creedal engagement in terms of Lee’s commentary to be found in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians.

With regard to using concepts of spirituality, most of this recent body of peer reviewed theological scholarship relates to the earlier findings from social science research in the following ways. First: research and studies associated with theology as evidenced in the peer reviewed literature over the past decade are largely silent on definitions of spirituality. Second: where the issue of definition of spirituality occur there is generally acceptance of the broad thematic approach found in the earlier body of social science scholarship. Third: there is an uptake of the conceptual work of Schneiders and others which take definitions and discussions of spirituality to considerations of anthropological breadth and culture. Schneiders’ scholarship is an important and contemporary theological approach to spirituality. As an established and well regarded branch of Christian theological research into spirituality this area argues for a broader, anthropological concept of spirituality while retaining a Christian commitment. This field of scholarship was influenced by post-modernism suspicions around absolutism and meta-narratives. It strove to engage in conversations with all disciplines working to understand the human individual in all human contexts. Spirituality as an academic discipline has been shaped and articulated by scholars such as Peter Van Ness (1996), Sandra Schneiders (1997, 2002), Phillip Sheldrake (2007) and Arthur Holder (2011).
In the introduction to his essay “Spirituality and its critical methodology” Philip Sheldrake (2006, p. 15) observes:

Sandra Schneiders has led the debate about methodology (for spirituality) in the English-speaking world with a succession of seminal articles. Whatever position we take on the overall relationship between spirituality and theology, Prof. Schneiders has rightly questioned the imperialism of dogmatic theology as the nonnegotiable determinant of spirituality. Spirituality is not reducible to a second-order application to doctrine of life. It involves the study of “felt experience” and “lived practice” in ways that, while not detached from theological tradition, overflow the boundaries that positivist theology tends to set.

As recognised by Sheldrake, the approach to discussing spirituality in the discipline field developed by Schneiders and others is accepting of individual experience and daily “spiritual” life style in a broadly conceived sense but still within the context of Christian belief. This theological field of scholarship allows a primary focus on spiritual experience, but spiritual experience which is not limited to positivistic, theologically framed events.

_Spirituality as an academic discipline_

Spirituality as articulated by Schneiders in its many contexts is a _tour de force_ of breadth of scholarship and conceptual development. Holder (2011, p. 6) identifies Schneiders as “perhaps the most articulate and prolific English-speaking scholar writing on the definitions and methodologies appropriate to this relatively new academic tradition”. I do not intend, however, to attempt to respond to the scope of this scholarship. My aim in this part of the discussion is limited to: (i) detail the definition of spirituality articulated by Schneiders; (ii) distinguish between the understanding of “definition”, “approach” and “methodology” used in spirituality as an academic discipline; (iii) provide a rationale for why the definition by Schneiders has been selected; (iv) provide a rationale for why the definition is re-framed for this study; and (v) discuss the issue of “valid” and “invalid” spiritual experience.

_Spirituality – “platform”, “field”, “definition”, “approach”, “methodology” as conceptualised in spirituality scholarship_

Schneiders is meticulous in outlining her conceptual model of academic spirituality. She does this in terms of:

- a pre-definition “platform”
- “definition”
- “approach”
- “methodology”.
She also argues a Christian perspective for each of the model's elements. The outline of Schneiders' modelling of spirituality here is largely a paraphrase and re-organisation of her seminal work “Approaches to the study of Christian spirituality” (2011, pp. 15–33). I am providing this level of detail around Schneiders’ definition and model of academic spirituality because I will rely on a re-framing of her definition throughout this study. I will reference her definitional efforts again in terms of “Biblical spirituality”; I will reference my re-framing of her model of spirituality when I develop a framework for analysis and comparison for the contemporary and Biblical narratives; and I will largely employ her critical methodology of a hermeneutic of literary criticism when interpreting the Biblical narratives.

My summation of Schneiders’ definition and model is offered below.

**Pre-definition “platform”:** In introducing the definition for “spirituality” in terms of being an academic field, Schneiders observes:

- that spirituality is an existential phenomenon which *first* requires identification and *second* requires a description of the field in which it is the object of study
- that spirituality as such is not necessarily religious, denominational, or confessional
- that lived spirituality will always involve elements and aspects which can only be investigated adequately by the use of other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, art, rhetoric or science.

Schneiders then moves from field to discipline.

The *specific formality or field in which spirituality is the object of study:* Schneiders observes that:

- the field of spirituality is broad and one in which personal, practical and theoretical projects and contexts are pursued and interact
- spirituality is studied in a variety of academic contexts:
  - the first context is vertical – i.e. from basic/undergraduate to PhD-level study, which is typical of any field
  - the second context is horizontally integrated across many disciplines and research interests
  - within the *field* (my emphasis) of spirituality “the *academic discipline* (my emphasis) of spirituality is primarily the research discipline whose specific
objective is the expansion of our knowledge and understanding of the God-human relationship”. It is studied in academic spirituality as Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality as an academic discipline “studies the lived experience of Christian faith, the subjective appropriation of faith and living of discipleship in their individual and corporate actualization(s).” (Schneiders 2011, p. 16)

In an unannounced and unexplained transition from studying “the God-human relationship” to studying “the lived experience of Christian faith” Schneiders narrowed her outline of what constituted the academic discipline of spirituality from the broad study of “the God-human relationship” to the narrower, orthodox formulation of study of “the lived experience of Christian faith”. I retained the pre-transition formulation: this was “the academic discipline of spirituality is primarily the research discipline whose specific objective is the expansion of our knowledge and understanding of the God-human relationship” (Schneiders, 2011 p. 16). This formed part of the discussion around my following re-framing of Schneiders’ definition – particularly in the context of Biblical spirituality.

Definition of spirituality: In introducing her definition of spirituality, Schneiders clarifies that she will define spirituality as an existential phenomenon first and then move to the Christian spirituality definition second: “I would prefer to situate Christian spirituality as an existential phenomenon within a more nuanced definition of spirituality in general and then (my emphasis) specify it as Christian” (2011, p. 16).

The nuanced definition of spirituality prior to specifying a Christian spirituality: Schneiders offers her existential phenomenon definition of spirituality as: “the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence”. She then defines spirituality as an existential phenomenon as:

... the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives (Schneiders 1989, p. 684; 2011, p. 16).

This definition of spirituality has gained wide acceptance in the peer reviewed literature reporting studies on spirituality (Gelfer 2009, Tolmie 2011, Welzen 2011). Her specific clarification for each element of the definition is as follows:
1. Spirituality is not simply spontaneous experience, however elevating or illuminating, but a conscious and deliberate way of living. It is an ongoing project, not merely a collection of experiences or episodes.

2. The individual is moved through the existential phenomenon of spirituality towards an ultimate goal. This may be God or it may be something other than God; for example, the full personhood of humans, world peace, enlightenment, or the good of the cosmos.

3. The existential phenomenon of spirituality involves the individual in personal growth and value-based relationship and so is dynamic.

4. Spiritually negative life-organisations are disqualified as a result of these definitional elements.

As Schneiders observes, Christian spirituality is a particular experiential actualisation of this human capacity for self-transcendence. The discipline of Christian spirituality necessarily studies the particular actualisation of this human capacity for self-transcendence. It can however “never abstract completely from the realization that Christianity shares both the experience we call spirituality and the field which studies such experiences with other religious traditions and even non-religious movements” (Schneiders 2011, p. 26).

**Specifying a Christian spirituality:** Schneiders uses this definition of the existential phenomenon of spirituality as a base upon which to specify Christian spirituality. She defines Christian spirituality in the following way. The distinguishing characteristic of Christian spirituality with regard to the horizon of ultimate value is the claim that the horizon is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ to whom Scripture normatively witnesses and whose life:

- “is communicated to the believer by the Holy Spirit making her or him a child of God”
- “is celebrated sacramentally within the believing community of the church”
- is “lived in the world as mission in and to the coming reign of God” (Schneiders 2011, p. 17).

In this definitional field, the following features exist:

- Spirituality studies the lived experience of Christian faith, and it investigates the spiritual life as it is and has been concretely lived.
- Spirituality studies unique experiences of the living of Christian faith.
- In Christian spirituality both “self” and “reality” are defined by faith (Schneiders 2011, p. 17).

*The personal interest in the spiritual:* Schneiders claims that there is an inevitable interest at some level in the researcher’s own personal spirituality.

**Approaches and methodologies associated with spirituality as an academic discipline**

Schneiders’ conceptual work with regard to spirituality is articulated in its basic form as a model, including definition, approaches, methodologies and the self-implicating nature of the discipline.

**Approaches to spirituality:** Schneiders defines “approaches to the study of spirituality” as orienting frameworks in which specific methodologies are developed for the study of particular phenomena within the field of spirituality. Approaches are the knowledge and skills needed to study particular aspects of the phenomena of spirituality. Schnieders nominates three approaches to the study of Christian spirituality:

First, the historical approach: integral to this approach is the recognition that spirituality as lived experience takes place dimensionally (i.e. in time and space), within cultural, social and political contexts, and within past events.

Second, the theological approach: Christian spirituality is Christian because of its relationship to the creed, code and cult of the church’s tradition.

Third, the anthropological approach: this approach recognises that:

- spirituality is an anthropological constant
- humans are characterised by a capacity for self-transcendence towards ultimate value, whether or not they nurture this capacity or do so in religious or non-religious ways
- Christian spirituality is first human and then Christian

- it needs to dialogue with non-theological disciplines such as aesthetic, linguistic, psychological, cosmological; with important aspects of contemporary experience such as existentialism, ecological concerns, gender issues, peace and justice issues; with the concerns of other religious traditions; and with public intellectuals who repudiate or ignore institutional religion

- Christian spirituality anthropologically approached is public discourse – culturally and academically. It is learning to participate in a conversation it does not totally control without losing or diminishing its specifically Christian identity.

**Methodologies:** Schneiders defines “methodologies” as articulated procedures used to investigate particular aspects of the phenomena of spirituality (Schneiders 2011, p. 26). Methodologies are used to ensure the validity of the study associated with particular aspects of the phenomena of spirituality. The primary focus is the interpretation of the subject matter of spirituality. It has a double focus – first to understand and explain; and second the personal transformation of the researcher. Schneiders argues that methodologies within an anthropological approach are virtually always interdisciplinary (Schneiders 2011, p. 26).

**Articulating Schneiders’ definition of spirituality with that from social science scholarship**

The definition and concept of spirituality developed by Schneiders within her overall model of spirituality share considerable conceptual space with the consolidated definition and concept of spirituality developed from selected social science research. This shared conceptual space represents an important conjunction of two differently focused disciplinary knowledge sets. The focus of social science scholarship is growing knowledge of phenomenological, material existence through appropriately conducted and interpreted research. The focus of theological scholarship is growing knowledge and experience of God through reflection and revelation. Schneiders’ theological scholarship in developing spirituality as an academic discipline provided the theoretical underpinning for dialogue between two differently focused disciplinary knowledge sets.

Spirituality as an academic discipline recognises spirituality as:
- a complex set of features and dynamics
- supporting contextualisation in the “real life” experiences of individuals
understood in the context of relationships

• defying narrow definitions

• most usefully discussed in a broad manner

• understood in the context of culture in its widest conceptualisation

• containing the following themes:

  o existence of a transcendent reality
  o individual connection with the transcendent reality
  o personal transformation
  o individual search for meaning
  o morally framed relationships – i.e. consciously striving to integrate one’s life

  *not in terms of isolation* (my emphasis).

These features of spirituality are the platform upon which Schneiders places her frame of Christian spirituality. It is the integration of the nuanced definition of spirituality prior to specifying a Christian spirituality and the following discussions around approaches and methodologies that give rise to this platform.

Schneiders’ nuanced definition together with the issues raised in the development of the model around approaches and methodology, articulate with the definitions and approaches to spirituality which are evident in current selected social science research scholarship. In establishing an articulated relationship between the social science definition and that of Schneiders’ work a number of issues are important. First, the social science definition is a construct developed from a number of evidence driven research undertakings. In contrast, the approach and definition developed from spirituality as an academic discipline is a cohesively articulated concept. The conceptually more mature definition of spirituality has the potential to support opportunities for progressing theory driven efforts with regard to some social science studies around spirituality. This is the circumstance raised by Aird in her research (Aird 2007, pp. 210-213). Second, the articulated nature of definitions and concepts of spirituality between the construct derived from social science research and spirituality as an academic discipline support a facilitated exchange of research data and outcomes. This territory of debate and exchange is one that had been discussed and encouraged by theologians associated with spirituality as an academic discipline (Schneiders 2000, p. 27). It is the dialogue space which Schneiders envisages will develop disciplinary knowledge of spirituality.
1.3.2.2 Spirituality – the rationale for the choice of definition

The definition of spirituality with which this study works then is that derived from Schneiders’ work. This definition is the nuanced definition of spirituality prior to specifying a Christian spirituality:

... the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives (Schneiders 1989, p. 684).

When unpacked and taken in conjunction with the extended model of spirituality – i.e. approaches and methodologies – it delivers a parallel research underpinning to the study of spirituality to that currently employed in selected social science research. Given this circumstance the question which next needs to be clarified is: why privilege the theological definition over the construct definition developed from social science research?

I have chosen to use the definition of spirituality and its associated terms from the field of spirituality because of the following considerations.

First, I concede that both definitions – a social science constructed definition and the definition provided by spirituality scholarship – would practically serve equally well to progress the response to the research questions. The choice of the definition and approach derived from spirituality scholarship, however, is made because of the potential advantages to be gained for this study in terms of its intersecting relationships with (i) a broad understanding of spirituality, (ii) Biblical spirituality, (iii) the modelling of the framework for analysis and comparison of the contemporary and Biblical narratives, and (iv) the critical methodology of literary criticism used in the scriptural exegeses undertaken as part of the study. Second, Schneiders’ definition has also been chosen because it is an integrated, theological definition framed in the context of Christian spirituality. There is cultural significance in this. In Australia’s Western European culture, language and conceptual capital are inextricably underpinned by Christianity in its many complex manifestations. Regardless of the secularisation of society and an individual’s claim to being atheist, cultural reference to Christianity is unavoidable.

This cultural aspect to a broadly understood spirituality is also why I have no conceptual difficulty in extending Schneiders’ definition to cover individuals who provided spiritual experiences while also claiming to be atheists. Schneiders, however, is clear: her definition
stands squarely in the context of Christian theology’s perspectives on spirituality. However, the broad view of spirituality with which she and her colleagues associate has been taken up and elaborated by other theologians – arguing for example that the cultural aspect of spirituality is critical in extending and developing contemporary theology (King, 2008).

Third, Schneiders’ definition and approach framed within Christian spirituality as cultural capital emphasises a moral frame of reference for living. This is an important definitional feature. All of this study’s participants – including those who identified as atheists – viewed themselves as consciously living their lives in accordance with Christian values: love, compassion, justice. Moral consciousness, for example, is also of particular concern in the context of care for frail aged persons. Health and care professionals make ethical decisions on a daily basis regarding palliative care, aged care, treatment options and guarding the rights of the individual client.

Some social science researchers are reticent about linking a moral frame of reference definitionally to spirituality. They see ethics and values as “consequences” of spirituality rather than central to an understanding of it (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, p. 34). Other researchers (Robinson 2008), however, argue that spirituality involves reflection and emotional engagement centred upon the relationship with the individual self and others. Spirituality therefore challenges the individual to reflect upon meaning in terms of individual choice and autonomy. It also involves the individual in considering the values which are assumed in relating to others, to the community, to the environment, and to personal divinities. Rather than being a laissez-faire relativist zone, contemporary spirituality actually marks a critically human stepping off point in relation to the development of a moral creation both as an individual and as an individual in community with others.

Fourth, in clarifying the various elements of her definition, Schneiders maintains that the definition aims to capture the dynamic nature of spirituality. This emphasis on the dynamism of spirituality is not typically captured as a specific feature in other definitional efforts. It is an important thematic element in the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians and I will re-visit it in the later chapters of this study. Fifth, in her formulation of spirituality as an experience of “consciously striving” towards a highest value, Schneiders approaches the issue of how conscious reflection and memory are critical in the spiritual experiences of the older individuals participating in this study. It also takes us to Jung’s opening observations about how working actively with memories supports individual growth within
the present – and beyond (Jung 1967 pp. 351-352). It keeps the individual’s life narrative vital and without a limiting horizon.

These five broad arguments then provide the rationale for my choice of definition with regard to “spirituality” and its associated terms.

Re-framing Schneiders’ definition for this study

Schneiders’ definition and model of spirituality has wide currency. It is consistently referenced and modified in line with the particular research project under consideration – e.g. Gelfer (2009); Tolmie (2011); Welzen (2011). I have already in this discussion so far re-framed Schneiders’ definition for the purposes of this study in that:

1. I use the nuanced definition of spirituality as an experiential phenomenon prior to its contextualisation within the Christian faith
2. I also use the contextual and interdisciplinary features of Schneiders’ model without its specific contextualisation within the Christian faith.

Christian spirituality’s relationship to cultural capital and moral relationship is important for this study. However, orthodox formulations of Christian faith do not feature in the study’s aims or research questions. This leads to one final re-framing argument which is occasioned in Schneiders’ clarification around an element of the nuanced definition of spirituality. Schneiders views spirituality as: “not simply spontaneous experience, however elevating or illuminating, but a conscious and deliberate way of living” as a Christian (2011, p. 16). This study argues that there are a number of difficulties with this view from the perspective of the present research.

First, the difficulty with this limitation around spirituality is that the “spontaneous” ecstatic experience is at times the climax of, or precursor to, spiritual living in the broad sense that she herself allows. This study will not remove any spiritual experience as determined by an individual from its field of study although it is acknowledged that the interplay between the spiritual (and typically meaningful) experience and how individuals conduct their lives going forward appears also to be an integral aspect of spirituality as articulated by contemporary spiritual narrators.
Second, it is also argued that the work of academic Christian spirituality is itself an ongoing narrative. The broad approach which spirituality scholarship has developed provides the opportunity for a contemporary reinvigoration of theological discussion around spirituality. Such ongoing discussion and debate will offer differing emphases and perspectives to that of Schneiders and her colleagues’ original position. In this case I understand that Schneiders’ conception of and approach to spirituality calls for its conscious re-contextualisation in the “real life” spiritual experiences of contemporary individuals. The complexities involved with the individual experiencing and conducting their life in a “conscious and deliberate way” have occupied modern philosophy from Kant to de Certeau (1984). This area of philosophy makes Schneiders’ definitional element available to ongoing debates within contemporary philosophy around self-awareness and conscious living. There is in fact considerable variability in individual capacity for “conscious and deliberate” living, let alone living within the strategic frameworks of any orthodoxy. For my study, a better way of arguing this circumstance is to allow any individual experience of spirituality to be consciously acknowledged above the level of automatically lived contemporary living, re-contextualised in terms of personal tactics and integrated into conscious personal meaning with its attendant faith, moral and cultural constructs. This spiritual process may or may not be contextualised within an orthodox Christian framework – although it necessarily will be contextualised within a culturally Christian framework. Again, any individual experience identified by an individual participant as personally spiritual and meaningful will be accepted as “spiritual” for the context of this study. When an individual participant responds by providing personal stories around their “spiritual experience or experiences” this is accepted by the present study on the participant’s “real life” meaning terms. The study understands that participants, along with most contemporary individuals, understand spirituality broadly: and as the later thematic analyses of the participants’ narratives reveal “spiritual experience” involves those elements of transcendence, meaning, and life transformation which provide the formal definitional foundations of Schneiders’ work in an extended cultural context and of the constructed elements of spirituality found in contemporary social science research.

“Valid” or “invalid” spiritual experience

There is one final issue which the discussion around spirituality and spiritual experience requires this study to consider. It is the area associated with determining whether a spiritual experience is accepted as validly “spiritual” from the perspective of the major Christian faith traditions; or accepted as scientifically valid from the perspective of the scientific paradigm.
Aird (2007) has observed that paradigmatic scientific or positivist research largely despairs of investigating spirituality. This is because definitional and conceptual inconsistencies related to spirituality effectively do not allow researchable variables to be established. In this circumstance the terms “delusional” and “disconnected from reality” when applied to spirituality or religious experience are actually difficult to argue scientifically. Phenomenological social science research, however, largely accepts spiritual experience on its own terms and defined through its context. This qualitative field of scientific research tends not to discuss spirituality in terms of “valid” or “invalid” but rather as a phenomenological event available for investigation and analysis. This social science approach is consistent with the view of spiritual experience associated with this present study.

The next consideration is whether discernment as an institutional theological practice has a place in this study’s definition of and approaches to spirituality. Orthodox religious thinking as found in the major Christian faith traditions often approaches spiritual experience and expression with caution. An individual or group’s spiritual experience or actions are typically tested against such questions as

- Is there Scriptural authority for the spiritual experience?
- Does the spiritual experience reflect the influence of good or evil spirits?
- Has the spiritual experience been validated by appropriately skilled and trustworthy parties?

Spohn, for example, argues this orthodox position, where spirituality is “the affective, practical and transformative side of religion” (2003, p. 255). Any “spirituality” which lives outside “accountability to a set of doctrines or a specific community of people” (2003, p. 256) is held up to dismissive ridicule. Consider, for example, Spohn’s views on some spiritual writings: “some spiritual’ writings eschew any tradition and are little more than self-help books laced with mystical overtones. They are not interested in lasting personal change or any sense of moral demands consequent upon religious experience” (2003, p. 256). As peer-reviewed scholarship this material is disappointing in its lack of evidence and discussion of contemporary spirituality, both from theological and social science perspectives. Scholars such as Benson (1997) and Kinsley (1996) for example, would be seen as populist authors writing about spirituality rather than serious researchers attempting to communicate with a broad rather than an elite population. Spohn does in fact reference Schneiders’ work on spirituality but observes that it is “still in the process of being defined as an academic
discipline” (2003, p. 255 footnote); and that it is a “second order discipline” in relation to the “first-order manifestations of spirituality”. It appears then that the issue of “valid” and “invalid” spiritual experience remains alive in orthodox theological scholarship. Arguing the orthodox position, however, needs a way to address the lucidity and learning of Schneiders and other like-minded scholars as well as provide reliable evidence for the “inappropriate” nature of spirituality experienced outside of orthodox religion.

As a general observation, it would seem entirely appropriate for orthodox Christianity to scrutinise any publically articulated spiritual experience for validity within its particular faith orthodoxy. But my research in this instance is not seeking to uphold or “prove” any faith orthodoxy; and it only seeks to have a spiritual experience confirmed in the context of personal reflection, personal identification and personal meaning. The spiritual experiences of the contemporary individuals in this study are intensely privately held experiences. The participants have not placed their spiritual experiences in the public domain for institutional commentary. If discernment is an issue, it remains a reflectively personal one prior to making the spiritual experience available – anonymously – for specific research purposes.

This study therefore will use an open and inclusive approach to spirituality and aims thereby to capture the personal contextualised meaning in narratives of older contemporary Australians. By working without the boundaries and strictures imposed by discernment practices of a range of faith traditions, individuals and their “real life” spiritual stories can be fully explored and validated.

1.3.2.3 “Spirituality” in the context of the Biblical exegesis
The approach to and definition of spirituality and its associated terms chosen on the basis of the foregoing arguments, find consistent application in the contemporary contexts explored in this study. However this research also explores the Biblical narratives of selected old protagonists within a research design which allows comparison between contemporary and Scriptural spiritual experiences; and the re-contextualization of both Biblical spiritual experiences and contemporary discursive scholarship through comparison with the spiritual

3 It is important to recall Sheldrake’s statement about the “first order” nature of spirituality: “Spirituality is not reducible to a second-order application to doctrine of life. It involves the study of ‘felt experience’ and ‘lived practice’ in ways that, while not detached from theological tradition, overflow the boundaries that positivist theology tends to set” (Sheldrake 2006, p.15).
experiences of older Australians. Given this circumstance the approach for and the definition of spirituality needed to be discussed in relation to the Biblical narratives.

One of the contemporary narrators wrote ‘my spirituality is my relationship with God’. It is where this discussion around spirituality in the Biblical narratives is located. It is argued that the Bible and its narratives explore the God-human relationship and so these narratives too explore human spirituality. The approach and definition with regard to spirituality chosen for the present study is that taken from academic scholarship – namely ‘...the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives’ (Schneiders 1989, p. 684). This definition is now considered in terms of Schneiders’ own specific definition of Biblical spirituality, recent peer reviewed articles and other scholarly material relating to Biblical spirituality.

Schneiders’ definition of Biblical spirituality and recent scholarship on Biblical spirituality

Schneiders’ definition of Biblical spirituality: The discussion of Biblical spirituality in current scholarship initially focuses on the work of Sandra Schneiders (2002, 2013). Because her thinking around spirituality is important to the definition and overall approach taken by this present study, her definition of Biblical spirituality is examined in some detail. In particular my study seeks to clarify Schneiders distinction between the interpretive process of Biblical textual material and personal purpose (Schneiders 2013, pp. xii-xviii). It was this distinction which primarily makes her definition of Biblical spirituality relevant to my study.

Schneiders’ 2002 article “Biblical Spirituality” presents Biblical spirituality as spiritual engagement and interpretive process which she links to Scriptural exegetical hermeneutics. She argues “Biblical spirituality refers to the spiritualties that come to expression in the Bible and witness to patterns of relationship with God that encourage our own religious experience” (2002, p. 133). Schneiders recognises Biblical spirituality as comprising Scriptural material which evidenced the human-God relationship; and personal salvific spiritual engagement instigated and experienced by the reader interacting with the Scriptural material in terms which were theologically orthodox Christian. The polarities in Schneiders’ definition here were noted by Donohue (2006) who cautioned about overreaching towards one end of the polarity or the other. Donohue’s observation of Schneiders’ polarized definition of Biblical spirituality is supported by this study, but his argument for a middle way
approach to the definitional issue is not supported. The polarized definition works well provided that those using it understand its polarized nature and argue (like Park 2011 and Mosbarger 2013) for a particular position along the potential continuum of use.

Re-framing Schneiders’ definition of Biblical spirituality for this study

*Biblical spirituality refers to the spiritualities that come to expression in the Bible and witness to patterns of relationship with God that instruct and encourage our own religious experience* (Schneiders 2002, p. 133).

My study agrees with and uses this definition of Biblical spirituality as “relationship with God”. This is viewed as consistent with the more broadly articulated definition Schneiders had provided this study. Her additional words here – that “instruct and encourage our own religious experience” – are also useful for the purpose of definition provided that this phrasing refers to characters in the Biblical text as well as potentially to the reader/interpreter. This research does not however include in its definition her “personal transformation” purpose as an extended Christian faith formulation as Schneiders does in her 2002 and 2013 publications.

Biblical scholars who approached Biblical spirituality in a similar manner to Schneiders frequently make clear the level of their participation in this individual exegetical purpose of personal transformation. Such clarification is consistent with the practice of qualitative research’s statements of reflexivity which is discussed in Chapter 3. The following scholars recently produced substantial work around Biblical spirituality. They reference Schneiders either directly in or through their exegetical approaches and clarify their personal purpose with regards to personal transformation. The focus here is on their definitions of Biblical spirituality and not the often substantial outcomes of their complete scholarly studies.

Mosbarger’s (2013) research references Schneiders definition of Biblical spirituality but explicitly states that the aspect of personal spiritual nourishment “is not addressed directly” in her study (2013 p. 5). Mosbarger eventually reaches separate definitions for New Testament spirituality and Old Testament spirituality which focus on relationship with Christ/Holy Spirit and relationship with Yahweh. The details which Mosbarger provide around her definitions are contestable from this study’s perspective but there is agreement with the basic definitional proposition around Biblical spirituality being defined in terms of relationship with God.
Green’s study of the Judah narratives (2013 b) strongly endorses the definition of Biblical spirituality which necessarily involves personal transformation. She too effectively privileges New Testament over Old Testament spirituality – “(l)n the Old Testament”, the contours of God’s Spirit are not so clear and coherent as they become in the New Testament, where they remain appropriately and wonderfully rich and thick” (2013 p. 27). She then follows this with a re-telling of the Judah narratives which provide creatively imagined drama rather than textual analysis – which in terms of qualitative interpretive options is a legitimate interpretive approach (Luce-Kapler, 2008). Similarly, Green (2013 a) provides a close reading of Jeremiah from the theme of compassion. It is insightful and focused at the text. Once more Green aligns herself with the “personal transformative” end of the Schnieders’ definitional polarity. However here it is argued she exceeds her exegetical remit and promulgates in a largely undeclared manner a Christian faith position. She does not argue her position as a reflexive statement of personal transformation but appears to make larger dogmatic claims. Identifying her work within Schnieders’ definition, she then extends the definition claiming for Christians it (spirituality’s goal) “is the triune God revealed in Jesus, approached via the paschal mystery and church community and lived through the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (2013a, p. 96). This latter claim for Christian spirituality is only one view of the theology. To make such a claim in any sense larger than the personal faith transformative position could lead to the schismatic theological debates which characterized Christianity since the confrontation of Paul and James. Donahue’s concerns found a voice here; and from my study’s perspective it illustrates the problem of failing to fully argue a declared personal position.

Sheridan (2012) offers a powerful and insightful literary critical reading of John 1-11 which discusses how this section of John’s Gospel uses intertextuality to progress its vision of Christ centred spirituality in contrast to the Jewish Mosaic Law. She does this without offering a definition of Biblical spirituality but her interpretive acuity and methodology clearly place her in Schnieders’ scholarship tradition. She largely eschews any declared position around personal transformative spirituality as part of her approach to arguing for insights around spirituality using textual analysis.

Park (2011) places his study of the sacred spaces of the Fourth Gospel in the hermeneutical grouping associated with Schnieders’ scholarship as his central referencing of her work shows. His interest in Biblical spirituality is framed in terms of the Fourth Gospel of the New testament and is in part a study of the how the Spirit/Holy Spirit/Paraclete “governs the flow

Coloe’s study (2006) provides a close textual analysis of the Temple theme in the Johannine Gospel. She clearly articulates her study within the “personal transformation” purpose of Schneiders’ Biblical spirituality definition – “I am an educated white Australian woman, a believing Christian for whom this gospel is part of my scriptural tradition. I read then with a hermeneutic of faith, as well as a hermeneutic of suspicion, as I critically engage with the text and wrestle with its multiple layers of meaning to retrieve a meaning that offers faith and life for me and others today” (2006 p. 6). Coloe also acknowledged her definitional and hermeneutical indebtedness to Schneiders and Ricoeur.

This constellation then of scholarship associated with Sandra Schneiders’ definition of Biblical spirituality is one in which my own study with regard Biblical spirituality is largely placed. The polarity of Schneiders’ definitional position is addressed by this study in the following way. First, a close reading of the text is undertaken to disclose thematic and symbolic material associated with emerging scriptural insights around old protagonist’s relationships with the Divine/God/“ultimate value one perceives”. At this point the study’s definition of spirituality is consistent with Schneiders’ view of spirituality in the Biblical context. Second, the personal polarity in Schneiders’ definition of Biblical spirituality is acknowledged and it is then argued that the study’s particular purpose does not include personal transformation. The rationale for this is not related to a personal faith position. The rationale for this study’s position with regard to the Schneiders’ definitional polarity is found in the two following concerns:

First, unless clearly declared and articulated as personal transformation in an open faith manner, the polarity of the Schneiders’ definition may be used to advance one particular faith tradition over others. Consequently it stands in danger of disenfranchising the spiritual and interpretive rights of others including for example Quakers, those from the Eastern Orthodox faith, Jews, Buddhists and even atheists. Atheists are not experientially precluded from spirituality (Van Ness 1997, p. 5; Smith 2001, p.4; Solomon 2002 p. xii); and the
important opportunities for dialogue between emerging scientific paradigms and spirituality require this open and broad approach to spirituality (Obrien, 2013). For example, some atheists state their transcendent awe in the face of Nature or the Cosmos. These phenomena for them acquire a numinous quality as evidenced in their responses. It is inconsistent for an inclusive approach to human spirituality to exclude any sentient human individual. Certainly, any disenfranchisement works against Schneiders’ interfaith potential for spirituality as an academic discipline which could “never abstract completely from the realization that Christianity shares both the experience we call spirituality and the field which studies such experiences with other religious traditions and even non-religious movements” (Schneiders 2011, p. 26).

Second: the focus on Biblical spirituality as being defined through Christian spirituality argues that in some way the sacred text of the Bible is linear in its insights around human spirituality. This perception values the Old Testament for its inter-textuality opportunities but views it as a less mature or revealed spirituality. My study disagrees with this position in regard to Biblical spirituality. The argument for example cannot be sustained that the Book of Job reveals a lesser spirituality than the gospels. This research’s interpretive argument around scriptural spirituality is: from the earliest dialogues with God nuanced insights into human spirituality are offered. My study’s perspective is on the spiritual maturity of the dialogue partner; and the “God” of that particular dialogue partner is a measure of and an insight into human spirituality. For this study the sacred text of the Bible then is not a linear movement from the unrefined dust of Adam and Eve to Christ coming again in glory but rather a series of profound meditations on human spirituality taking the individual through many complex and confronting spaces including those where the integration of human and divine is made manifest in Christ. The research argues such a perspective using the critical methodology of literary criticism in the later chapters of this study.

The definition of Biblical spirituality used in this study therefore follows that of Schneiders both in the earlier broad definitional statement and in her specific formulation of “Biblical spirituality”. It is acknowledged that the latter definition includes a polarity between close hermeneutic study of Scripture which enables the insights of the text to be studied both in its own right and personal transformation. This study does not include in its definition of “Biblical spirituality” any element of personal transformation formulated as an orthodox faith position – although it is accepted that it is practice for some scholars to do so to a lesser or greater degree; and that this practice is consistent with statements of reflexivity found in
appropriately conducted qualitative research. The use of Schneiders’ approach to and definition of Biblical spirituality is modified and elaborated in the context of this dissertation.

As another contribution to thinking around Biblical spirituality, Schneiders’ 2002 article also contains a number of observations which support that breadth of approach to spirituality with which she is associated. Such observations include:

First, Scripture is “not only a record of the spirituality of our forebears but a source and pattern of our own spirituality”. In other words Scriptural insights into human spirituality held their relevance from the historical context to the contemporary one.

Second, “Allowing the text to be itself, to speak in its own voice, is the primary purpose of Biblical scholarship, that is, of exegesis and criticism”. This is a reference to the conduct of Biblical study from the perspective of a literary critical hermeneutic. This exegetical position is taken up in the methodologies chapter at Chapter 3.

Third, “Fundamentalism, fanaticism, and socially dysfunctional literalism are vivid examples of Biblical "spirituality" that bypasses critical scholarship”. This observation removes Biblical spirituality from any narrowly conceived interpretation. In other words most points of view and considered hermeneutical approaches have something to contribute to the discussion around Biblical spirituality.

Here Schneiders comments with that breadth of approach and vision which characterizes her definitional work on spirituality and which provided this discussion with its own basic approach and definition. These three observations on Biblical spirituality are accepted as valid and important for the study and they are incorporated into its understanding of Biblical spirituality.

**Biblical spirituality in recent peer reviewed scholarly material**

In her 2002 article on Biblical spirituality Schneiders observes that Biblical scholarship with regard to spirituality contains a limited number of practitioners – “attempts by Biblical scholars ... to explicate the spiritualties in the Bible have so far been relatively few in number” (2002). Given that even a few additional insights into Biblical spirituality as a definitional activity need to be considered, the Proquest Religion database was searched under “Bible and Spirituality”, “peer reviewed”, and “most recent”. The results of this selection support Schneiders’ 2002 observation. The 100 most recent journals or reviews
which are produced by this Proquest search approach Biblical spirituality from a number of ways – but perhaps only 5 or 6 could be argued to offer Biblical exegesis from the perspective of spirituality. The most current peer reviewed literature again proves itself to be largely silent on definitional –or indeed exegetical – approaches to Biblical spirituality. Of those peer reviewed articles which were concerned with Biblical spirituality, the issue was addressed from the following perspectives: interfaith dialogue space; support for intra-faith “political” positions; and Biblical exegesis from the perspective of spirituality.

1.4 Rationale for the articulation of contemporary spiritual narratives with Biblical spiritual narratives

There are three key reasons why my research seeks to articulate the contemporary spiritual narratives with the selected Biblical spiritual narratives. These reasons are discussed in the following section.

First, several important studies which reported findings around spirituality and old age already include extended material on how the Bible was relevant to their work. An important example of this is found in those edited collections of peer reviewed articles where the theme is spirituality and ageing. Jewell’s edited books – *Spirituality and personhood in dementia* (2011), *Ageing, spirituality and wellbeing* (2004), and *Spirituality and ageing* (1999) – contain in their mix of chapters studies which report or reflect on direct Biblical or theological themes. For example *Ageing, spirituality and wellbeing* (2004) has among its contributing articles ‘Ageing and the Trinity’ (Hudson 2004); and Jewell argues in this edited work how Christian orthodoxies – here Catholic and Wesleyan – could be unhelpful for clients with dementia where the emphases of “growth towards that ‘perfect love’ are of little value to those whose personhood and life” (2011 p. 21) were effectively lost to the progress of the disease. In a similar way works edited by MacKinlay - *Ageing and spirituality across faiths and cultures* (2010), and *Spiritual growth and care in the Fourth Age of life* (2006) – contain discrete chapters where Scriptural readings were combined with social science reports on ageing and spirituality. For example, *Ageing and spirituality across faiths and cultures* (2010) has among its contributing articles ‘Outward decay and inward renewal: a Biblical perspective on ageing and the image of God’ (Painter 2011). In her seminal work *The spiritual dimension of ageing* (2004) MacKinlay dedicates as great an interpretive effort around ageing and Biblical wisdom literature (pp. 154-156) as she does earlier in her work around definitions of spirituality (pp. 51-52). In terms of my study and in a similar way,
research into the spirituality of contemporary older Australian individuals is articulated with Biblical material associated with old age and spirituality as expressed as the human individual-God relationship. Moreover, my dissertation’s research around contemporary and Biblical spirituality is conducted in a methodologically rigorous way which is largely lacking in MacKinlay’s work with regard to using Biblical material. Her Biblical commentary is illustrative and is not incorporated into a research design or conducted and the results offered in terms of the use of a critical methodology.

Second, the study’s review of documentation of peer reviewed scholarship which addresses definitional issues around spirituality together with Schneiders’ definitional and conceptual work on spirituality argues that there is overlap between selected qualitative social science work and spirituality and spirituality as conceptualized by Schneiders and her colleagues. My study’s arguments in support of this overlap of research interests has placed my research into the dialogue space which Schneiders worked to create so that everyone’s knowledge and understanding around spirituality could develop and grow. By virtue of both culture and theology Biblical scholarship has a place within this created dialogue space; and it is an option which the comparative study of Scriptural and contemporary spiritual narratives explores in a methodologically appropriate manner.

Third, my study’s articulation of the accounts of older Australian’s spiritual experiences with Biblical spiritual narratives aims to achieve a re-contextualization of Biblical spirituality in terms of contemporary experiences of spirituality. Re-contextualization is a significant term for responding to the research problem of my study; and I clarify its meaning for my study by referring to research undertaken by Deagon and Pendergast (2012) and Singh (2002). In establishing a definition for the purposes of their research on developing a framework for investigating spiritual health and well-being Deagon and Pendergast (2012) refer to Singh’s work on the contextualization of discourse (Singh 2002). The issue these researchers highlight with regard to conceptualising spirituality is “how spiritual concepts produced in ‘the real world’ (for example, dominant discourses on religion, nursing terminally ill cancer patients or ‘new aged’ spirituality) were altered for specific purposed by specific audiences...” (Deagon & Pendergast 2012, pp.5-6). Discourse on spirituality was inevitably altered from one discourse environment to another; and while generalized meaning might still apply it still stood as potentially compromised (Singh in Deagon & Pendergast 2012, p. 6). In order to achieve re-contextualization with regard to spirituality the researchers sought clarification of the currency of the concept of spirituality from the “real world” (sic). For
Deagon and Pendergast’s this clarification of currency involved reviewing global (United Nations) references to spirituality in policies and examining medical models of wellness. In terms of my study, the “real world” currency of Biblical spirituality was achieved through analysing Biblical thematic content and comparing this content with that of the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians. This constitutes a re-contextualization of Biblical spirituality.

1.5 Theorizing spirituality for older contemporary Australians

Spirituality as a focus of disciplinary research and knowledge appears to frustrate the theorist. This is because positivistic empirical research lacks agreed variables and definitions with regard to spirituality. What entity can the researcher study? and what variables can the researcher manipulate to test theoretical modelling? As Aird (2007) has suggested, the best probable way forward with research into spirituality is to use qualitative methodologies which accept the iterative relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon, and allow a phenomenon to be considered from multiple perspectives. From this qualitative research perspective, theories are not positivist generalized systems but rather orienting frameworks for investigating phenomena.

This study therefore uses a set of theories on spirituality and ageing as an orienting frame. The research is positioned at a theoretical level with the work of Jung in terms of his concepts of individuation and the role of conscious reflection in the later stages of human life (Jung,1967); and with the theory of gerotranscendence developed by Tornstam (1999, 2005,2011).

Jung (1984) theorized that in the second half of life the individual turns their focus to the task of individuation. Individuation is the process whereby the individual integrates the outer conscious world with their inner unconscious one. The task is aimed at creating ‘the Self’ which is a dynamic state of individual wholeness and one in which all aspects of the individual psyche have been integrated. The task of individuation is achieved through the use of the individual’s reflecting conscious and through the active engagement with the symbolic content of the psyche. The task of individuation can never be fully completed and the Self is the unreachable goal of an individual’s selfhood. Viewed from the perspective of spirituality, the task of the latter part of human life is to strive towards the ultimate value one perceives. Qualitative narrative research undertaken by Smith (2001) on the personal spirituality of 6
religious committed Catholic men at mid-life purposefully provides evidential contextualization of Jung’s theories of spirituality and later life in an Australian setting.

Tornstam’s theoretical model of gerotranscendence argues that the focus in later life shifts from materiality to questions about the meaning of life. Tornstam builds his theory of gerotranscendence on the theoretical work of Jung and Erikson (2011, p. 166); and his theorizing has been supported by qualitative as well as quantitative data. Gerotranscendence theory argues that “human ageing includes a potential to mature into a new outlook on and understanding of life”; and that it implies “a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction” (2011, p.166). These two theories on spirituality and ageing form the theoretical perspective of this study. The research will also take up aspects of Jung’s theories to account interpretively for archetypal patterns and symbolic values in the literary critical readings of the selected Biblical passages.

1.6 Context of the study

As the previous definitional discussions around spirituality and ageing have demonstrated, this study is conducted within a complex set of overlapping research interests. Placing the present study and its research questions in the various contexts where they apply, result in:

- the context of research and studies associated with theology, including:
  - spirituality as an academic discipline
  - culture and spirituality
  - Scriptural studies
  - pastoral and ministry scholarship
- the context of selected social science scholarship, including:
  - the contemporary Australian context; the work of Elizabeth MacKinlay
  - the contemporary Australian context; the study of spirituality and wellbeing by Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010).

Context of research and studies associated with theology

Spirituality as an academic discipline

In the discussion around definitions and concepts of spirituality in general and Biblical spirituality specifically, this study’s indebtedness to the theological work of Schneiders’ and
the scholarship of others around her is acknowledged. Schneiders’ conceptual efforts with regard to a broadly articulated spirituality together with the hermeneutical close reading of Scripture are reflected in this present study in a number of key ways. These ways are: firstly, a broadly conceived understanding of spirituality which facilitated investigation and interpretation of the spiritual experiences of older Australians. Secondly, the development of a Framework of Spirituality in Chapter 3 which integrates definitional and methodological approaches from spirituality as an academic discipline and those from some recent social science research around spirituality. This synthesised framework is used to argue the level of congruence between the narrated experiences of spirituality and disciplinary scholarship on spirituality.

**Culture and spirituality**

As well as working in the context provided by Schneiders, the present study also engages with current theological scholarship around spirituality and culture. In particular, the work of Ursula King (2009, 2001) is important here. In this study I argue that in contemporary Australian society we are inevitably culturally Christian. The cultural capital of modern Western society is so shaped by its Christianity that even to deny God is to deal in conceptual material embedded in cultural Christianity. It is this circumstance that in part privileges Schneiders’ Christian-oriented definitions in this study over those that remove themselves entirely from any faith or religion. King, however, would take the discussion far wider than seeking a broad approach to spirituality by virtue of the embedded nature of Christianity in Western European culture. For King, spirituality has to find definition as a driver of large-scale (even global) social transformations (2008, p. x). Her vision of spirituality is oriented towards action and social justice – she asks not what spirituality is but rather “what spirituality does” (2008, p. 3). In the wide spectrum of social activity, King sees a critical dynamic and socially maturing role for spirituality. Among the areas she nominates for this spirituality is health and wellbeing. In the context of King’s perspectives on spirituality, culture and society, this study seeks to engage with the “real world” spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians and argues that their spirituality is rich and dynamic – and certainly challenging to social stereotypes of old age in deficit health or medical models which are of concern to King.

**Scriptural studies**

Through considerations around definition and through exegesis of Scripture in terms of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna, this study is situated in the context of scriptural studies.
This scriptural scholarship context of the study has been argued in the previous discussion around Biblical spirituality and scriptural hermeneutics.

*Pastoral and ministry scholarship*

This study also reflects contemporary concerns for pastoral and ministry scholarship and action. The larger social context of concern over the ageing Australian demographic is reflected in the daily experiences of pastors and church communities. Contemporary Western churches have voiced concerns over the imbalance of old and young members of their congregations and have consequently focused on bringing youth into their churches. However, while appropriately seeking to engage with the youth of their communities, church leaders also need to respond in a more theologically complex way to the intersection of old age and spirituality. It is not just a matter of compassion and more aged care beds in church-run residential facilities, important as these are. For contemporary theologians, there are many research challenges in the relationship between spirituality and ageing, as a growing body of peer-reviewed research suggests (Arjona 2013; Parker et al. 2013; Krause & Hayward 2013; Williams, Keigher & Williams 2012).

*Context of selected social science scholarship*

Theories which focus on spirituality and ageing are primarily situated in the discipline of psychology. For example, Erikson’s influential psychological model of the stages of human development (Erikson cited in Brown & Lowis 2003; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnik, 1986) theorizes that the increasing importance of the inner or spiritual life is a natural characteristic of the ageing human and by extension the failure to engage in an inner life as the individual ages is a failure to reach full human nature. Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence (2005) argues that in old age individuals develop to a stage where their perspective shifts “from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendental one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction” (Tornstam n.d.). In a similar manner, Byock (1997) and Dowling Singh (1998) theorize that a focus on the inner spiritual life is a preparation for the inevitable approach of death.

Sociological research is a further major focus of social science research into ageing and spirituality. This study is conducted as ageing issues assumed major social and political prominence in Western communities. In Australia, the UK, Canada and the United States, individuals who were born between 1946 and 1964 are known as Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers are now squarely facing the trauma of their own mortality and moreover, the children of the Baby Boomers and government strategists are confronting their own trauma in terms of how to care for and fund this phenomenon. The Australian context is currently a case
study for the broader Western community’s struggle to address the ageing “tsunami”. In July 2014 the Commonwealth government made important changes to the way individuals paid for their care as they became frail aged. These changes mean a move to a more “user-pays” provision of care (Courier Mail, 30 June 2014, p. 5) and to increased stresses on individuals and families as critical family assets are pushed in the direction of aged care service provision. Along with these aged care policy shifts by government, can be found an increasingly interested commercial sector that is looking to make sound profits from the new aged care environment (Marx 2014, p. 72). It might not however be all “doom and gloom” around this issue. Older populations are starting to show signs of innovation and push-back. The rural sugar town of Ingham in Queensland for example as recently reported as both an example of the “anticipated demographic tsunami”, and an example of a tight knit community where “everyone knows each other and ... wants to help one another” (Madigan 2014, p. 19). Some current social science research therefore is frequently concerned with how to keep ageing individuals physically and psychologically healthy and out of costly health care and nursing home facilities. The considerations which this study addresses are aligned to such concerns. However the study’s particular focus is the identification of appropriate ways to identify and discuss the older individual’s engagement in spiritual experience. Identifying and validating the older individual’s spiritual experiences are part of important social science research aimed at overcoming stereotypical responses to and treatment of older individuals.

The contemporary Australian context – the work of Elizabeth MacKinlay

The body of work around old age and spirituality by Professor Elizabeth MacKinlay has made important contributions to scholarship, both in Australia and internationally. The focus of her research is spirituality primarily in the context of aged care; and she brings to this scholarship perspectives from both theology and social science research. Her publications include Palliative care, ageing and spirituality (2012), Finding meaning in the experience of dementia: The place of spiritual reminiscence work (2012, with Trivitt), Ageing and spirituality across faiths and cultures (ed.) (2010), Ageing, disability and spirituality: Addressing the challenge of disability in later life (2008), Aging, spirituality and palliative care (ed.) (2006), Spiritual growth and care in the fourth age of life (2006), and On spirituality in later life: Humour and despair (ed.) (2004). In the context of Australian contemporary research into spirituality and ageing her contributions to scholarship provide an important platform for studies such as this present study. MacKinlay’s 2004 publication The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing is of particular importance because it is the work that my study relies on in a number of
important ways. These are summarized below but are expanded in the analysis undertaken around the spiritual narratives in later chapters of the study.

Areas of reliance between MacKinlay and my present research include:

- Both philosophically and evidentially the study relies on MacKinlay’s challenge to deficit models of ageing. Her work demonstrates the potential for richness and humour in life lived as an older individual.

- The study relies on MacKinlay’s (in part) qualitative approach, which aims to provide the older individual with a “voice” in terms of their spiritual experiences.

- The study relies on MacKinlay’s study as evidence that it is both feasible and productive to research the experiences of old age in contemporary Australia from the perspective of spirituality.

The contemporary Australian context – the study of spirituality and wellbeing by Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010)

In her 2007 study of spirituality and the mental health of adolescents, Aird refers to the work of Kaldor and his colleagues. While she finds methodological problems with this work, it still represents for her study one of the examples of research in which an attempt is made to develop a differential and thematic model of spirituality in contemporary Australian society. Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s later 2010 study, based as it was on an even larger sample and working with a similar model of spirituality, continues to be important for social science research in the area of spirituality and well-being in the Australian context. It reports findings across many variables associated with spirituality from a major survey of the Australian community. Primarily Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s research is used in this study because of their use of a broadly scoped approach to the elements that constitute spirituality. When used in conjunction with Schneider’s definitions and concepts of spirituality, the Kaldor, Hughes and Black study makes an important contribution to the development of this study’s Framework of Spirituality in Chapter 3.
1.7 Significance of the study

This study undertakes research in a complex of contextual spaces. The significance of this study therefore – contingent as it is upon such wide contextual architecture – has application to each context. I argue that my study is significant:

*For some theories of psychological human development* because it seeks to:

1. provide the accounts of and extend data on the content and dynamics of the accounts spiritual experiences of older contemporary individuals and so link to theories of human development and gerotranscendence

*For selected social science scholarship* because it seeks to:

1. develop an evidenced based model of cohort spirituality
2. extend the practice of studying spirituality in terms of the lived experience of discrete sets of individuals
3. extend the content profile of spirituality and spiritual experience of older contemporary Australians
4. provide a complete narrative data set against which future analysis may take place
5. provide arguments which directly challenge current deficit models of old age evident in social policy and health care considerations

*For spirituality and theological scholarship* because it seeks to:

1. re-contextualize spirituality as it had been broadly conceptualized by Schneiders and her colleagues in terms of current social science research and in terms of the “every day” and privately held spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians
2. employ the hermeneutic of literary criticism to re-contextualize Biblical spiritual narratives for contemporary currency in terms of the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians
3. Use the hermeneutic of literary criticism to argue for the recognition of Old Testament spirituality as nuanced and more than just an intertextuality opportunity for New Testament scholarship
For practice because it seeks to:

1. provide detailed thematic information about the personal spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians in the context of contemporary society with the view to guiding social policy, medical and care models
2. offer evidence around the spiritual experiences of older individuals which both support and challenge the pastoral praxis of churches and other faith communities

For methodology because it seeks to:

1. employ a bricolage research design (Rogers 2012) which captures perspectives from literary studies, Jungian psychology, gerontology, evidenced based aged care, Biblical studies, and theological scholarship on spirituality as an academic discipline. Specifically the study’s bricolage design involves a critical methodology of narrative literary criticism and Denzin’s qualitative interpretive interactionism (Denzin 1989) to integrate Scriptural and social science perspectives
2. extend qualitative narrative research’s application to research and studies associated with theology
3. identify a strategy for social science research with a focus on spirituality which employs definitional and conceptual scholarship associated with spirituality as an academic discipline

1.8 Outline of the study

It will be recalled that the aim of this study is to explore the accounts of spirituality narrated by older Australians aged 65 and over, and the articulation of these accounts of spirituality with Biblical spiritual narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. To achieve this aim my study has developed three research questions: these are

Research Question 1:
What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?
Research Question 2:
What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

Research Question 3:
Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

This dissertation is structured in 9 chapters and the chapters are outlined in the following section.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3, focus on clarifying the research problem in terms of definitions and concepts which are used in my study as well as the applicable literature for the study. The study’s research design and methodologies are also discussed in detail.

In Chapter 1 the aim of the study and its research questions are introduced. These are directed at the collection and thematic analysis of the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians both as a comparative study with key Biblical narratives and as a re-contextualization of spirituality in terms of contemporary approaches to discussing it. The chapter provides an extensive discussion of definitions associated with ageing/aged/old/old age and spirituality/spiritual/Biblical spirituality. It also discusses the contextual architecture of the study and the significance of the study.

In Chapter 2 scholarly and other contemporary literature pertaining to the study’s aim are identified and critiqued. The rationale for using limited non-peer reviewed resources including internet material is discussed. The applicable literature is identified and critiqued in relation to each of the three research questions; and the dissertation’s research is located within gaps and emerging problems in the literature.

In Chapter 3 the methodological discussion is introduced by considering a range of issues associated with each of the three research questions and determining the outcomes required of the study’s research design and methodologies. Bricolage as the chosen research design is discussed, and the limitations of the study’s qualitative research design outlined. The location of the researcher in the research is debated and a strategy outlined. The ethical
considerations around the collection and analysis of the contemporary narratives are outlined and authorship clarified.

The chapter is then presented in three sections. In Section 1 the methodology selected for addressing the collecting and analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives is outlined and the rationale for its selection is argued. In Section 2 the methodology selected for addressing the analysis of the Biblical spiritual narratives is outlined and the rationale for its selection is argued. In Section 3 arguments for the development of a Framework of Spirituality are presented. The Framework of Spirituality is discussed as a means (i) to conduct the comparative analysis of the two narrative sets and (ii) to establish the consistency between current scholarship around spirituality and the contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives.

In Chapter 4 the results of the data collection and analysis are presented as an interpretation of the spiritual narratives of the older individuals taking part in the study. A cohort generated model of spirituality is identified.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 the research focus is the analysis of the Biblical narratives using the critical methodology of literary criticism.

In Chapter 5 the selected Biblical narratives where the protagonists are old individuals, are introduced. These are the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna. Current peer reviewed scholarship around old age in the Bible is critiqued and the argument is made for a re-interpretation of old age in terms of its extended symbolic value. In Chapter 5 a literary critical analysis of the Abraham narrative is undertaken; the relevant debates in the literature are selectively referenced; and the analysis is concluded with a discussion of the interpretive findings in terms of the contemporary narratives of older individuals. In Chapter 6 a literary critical analysis of the Presentation in the Temple narrative from the perspective of Simeon and Anna’s witness roles is provided and the relevant debates in the literature are selectively referenced. The interpretive findings are argued in terms of the contemporary narratives of older individuals. In Chapter 7 a literary critical analysis of the Job narratives from the perspective of existential questions is provided and the relevant debates in the literature are selectively referenced. The analysis concludes with a discussion of the interpretive findings in terms of the contemporary narratives of older individuals.
In Chapter 8 the results of the literary critical analysis of the narratives associated with Abraham, Job, and Simeon and Anna are presented. A summary in Table format is provided in this chapter which argues the consistency between the thematic elements of the Biblical narratives and the developed Framework of Spirituality.

In Chapter 9 the findings of the research as they applied to both contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives are provided. These are discussed in terms of contemporary research and scholarship around spirituality and ageing. Reflections on theory as it relates to spirituality, re-contextualization, and bricolage research design are also made. The significance and implications of the study are discussed in terms of future research possibilities.
2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to critique literature on spirituality and ageing as the identified literature applies to the dissertation’s research problem. It will be recalled that the research problem for this study has been expressed in terms of the relative lack of data available on the accounts of the everyday spirituality of older contemporary Australian individuals and on the articulation of these accounts with Biblical spiritual narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. In this chapter the critique of literature around spirituality and ageing is addressed in relation to the three research questions which are framed to address the study’s research problem. The literature review therefore is organised from the perspective of the study’s research questions. These are:

**Research Question 1:**
What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

**Research Question 2:**
What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

**Research Question 3:**
Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

The outcome of this review and critique of the applicable literature will be the identification and documentation of gaps in the scholarship around the narrated spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians.
2.2 Literature review of scholarly literature and pastoral material relevant to Research Question 1

Research Question 1:
What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

2.2.1 Introduction
The applicable literature for Research Question 1 has a focus on narrated spiritual experiences of older individuals and where available, on narrated spiritual experiences of older individuals in contemporary Australia. This study uses guiding principles to identify the applicable literature on spirituality and ageing in relation to narrative and in the context of contemporary Australian society. These are: (i) the narratives or stories must contain content which addresses experiences or events consistent with the definition of spirituality used in this study; (ii) the stories must be a “story” –namely, they must have a narrative form- and the stories must be the personal stories of marginalized, preferably old, individuals; and (iv) the stories are contextualized within Western European culture and contemporary Australian society.

Given these guiding parameters, the applicable literature for Research Question 1 is organised through:

1. Identification and critique of narrative and spiritual narrative materials of older individuals – their thematic elements and the purposes for the story telling
2. the “form” of the narrative material – was the material offered as excepts in response to interview questions or as a story style narrative with a story-line progression incorporating episodes of significance and meaning
3. Identification and critique of the content or thematic elements of the spiritual stories of older contemporary Australians
2.2.2 Identifying narrative materials of older individuals – their thematic elements and the purposes for the story telling

The purposes of narrated spiritual experience – the tradition of spiritual narrative in Christian theology

The spiritual narrative has a long tradition in Western Christian theology. One only needs to consider the Confessions of St Augustine, the Showings of Julian of Norwich, the personal poetry of St John of the Cross, the writings of St Theresa of Avila, and – closer to contemporary times – the spiritual autobiographies of black American women in the 19th century (McKay 1989). The black American women cited in McKay’s study used their spiritual encounters with Christ as public witness, and as the foundation of their preaching and teaching vocations. Their spiritual stories too are important public, shared stories.

Such spiritual autobiographies are important in a number of ways. First, these spiritual narratives are public and high value cultural personal stories. For Christians, these spiritual narratives offer insights and guidance for everyone in the broad faith community in terms of approaching God. They have enriched the theological discourse of Christianity and the task of analysing them has in itself provided an opportunity for spiritual growth. Second, many of these spiritual narratives are regarded as great works of literature and stand alone as such. Analysis of these works has been undertaken by literary critics using a range of literary critical methodologies. Slade, for example has taken St Theresa’s spiritual autobiography and analysed it as a work of literature (Slade 1995). Finally, as with the spiritual autobiographies of the 19th century black women, these narratives provide important intersection points showing where spirituality and social movement align. These particular spiritual narratives for instance take us directly to Martin Luther King’s defining statement of “I had a dream”.

The spiritual stories that are the focus of this research share in this heritage. They acknowledge and describe direct personal spiritual experiences, they are often occasioned by a crisis or “epiphany” event, and they capture a number of significant intersection points between spirituality and a social phenomenon. With this latter point, for example, reference can be made to the fact that many in modern Western societies are confronted on a personal level with the trauma of an ageing demographic.

But these individual spiritual stories differ in two very important ways. These are: (i) these stories are stories about personal, private spiritual experiences; and (ii) they are the stories of older individuals. These are spiritual experiences and stories which have remained largely
unshared with anyone over a lifetime. They were not meant for spiritual guidance nor were they meant to proclaim a new social way, following in the footsteps of Christ. In an important way they are the quiet voice of human spirituality – present yet mostly unheard in the larger conversation of religious movements or social action.

Cohort generated spiritual stories

In Chapter 1 a body of research was identified which concentrates on developing definitions of spirituality from spiritual stories and their association with a specific group. Schmidt (2005) develops themes around contemporary spirituality from the perspective of leisure professionals; Barker and Floersch (2010) provide a similar study with a group of social workers; and Gregg (2011) develops themes around contemporary spirituality from the stories of black women who were diagnosed and treated for cancer. This body of research is methodologically important for this study and I will return to it in the discussion around methodologies for the present study. However, it is limited in terms of this study in that it does not provide or make available:

- the complete version of each of the spiritual stories for independent thematic analysis
- the stories are those of individuals who are less than 65 years old (in the sense that these people are still largely in the workforce).

Smith’s 2001 study The Personal Spirituality of Six Religiously-Committed Catholic Men at Mid-Life – a Narrative Approach is similarly important for my research from a methodological perspective because it is placed in an Australian context, it collects six detailed case studies on personal spirituality using a qualitative narrative methodology, it uses Schneiders’ definition of spirituality, and it provides extensive transcript material associated with each of the six participants. The limitations of Smith’s research for my study include: the unavailability of a complete version of each of the spiritual stories for independent thematic analysis, the homogeneity of the six participants, and the selected age cohort –namely middle aged men.

“Old age” fiction

Narrative methodologies are widely used in the field of gerontology. One approach has been to collect the stories of old people – either as direct narratives or as short stories built around old age (Smith 1990; Feldman, Kamler & Snyder 1996; Guenther 2007). This body of
research is limited in terms of the present study in that the stories are the fictionalised voices of another telling an older person’s story (Feldman); or linked to some special characteristic such as providing the stories of centenarians (Smith). They were not collected within a research design or employed appropriate methodologies.

Stories of older individuals addressing life meaning and identity

Narrative gerontology generally exists within the broader field of research interest surrounding the way human development and identity is linked to end-stage personal stories and story-telling. Key current contributions to the field are being provided by researchers such as Randall and Kenyon and other like-minded researchers (Randall & Kenyon 2004; de Medeiros 2013; Redmond 2014). These studies argue that an individual’s narratives essentially carry their self-ness and how these stories unfold is critical to human development as the individual reaches old age. Such researchers interact with contemporary individuals using a range of narrative methodologies to create data and analyse thematic material in terms of areas as diverse as depression in old age (de Medeiros 2013) the development of Erickson’s model of psychological development (Redmond 2014) and the role of reflective listening in aged care and palliative contexts (Foster 2008). While the collection of narrative material from older individuals is commonly used, the material is rarely aimed at the direct collection of spiritual experiences for understanding the nature of the spiritual experience itself. It could be argued however that many of the stories collected from older individuals relate to issues of meaning and ongoing reflection in their current circumstances. In this broad sense they are also “spiritual”, given that the search for meaning and the use of reflection are associated with this study’s concept of spirituality.

The work of Randall and McKim takes this branch of narrative gerontology into shared space with literary theory while also arguing for storytelling and meaning/spirituality to be linked. Their starting point is that gerontology is “inherently interdisciplinary” (2008, p. 19) so that with regard to the analysis of textual material (i.e. gerontology narrative), the skills of the psychologist and the literary critic are complementary. From this shared space they explore how the storytelling of older individuals creates life stories which are integral to the individual’s life meaning (and hence their spirituality) and how such stories may be approached with the same analytical tools used in literary analysis. Essentially, they argue that “a poetics of aging can contribute insights into the nature of spirituality into later life, not to mention the overall issue of existential meaning” (2008, p. 10). Randall and McKim’s observations here speak to both the objectives and methodologies of the present study. Yet
they also do not provide any narrative data against which they demonstrate their conceptual arguments.

Narrative gerontology research material associated with questions of meaning therefore is generally not framed at a direct understanding of the content of the older person’s spiritual experiences but rather at other concerns. The use of such research literature for this study is once more tangential and limited. While the collection of stories from older contemporary individuals is methodologically appropriate for my research, the data provided by the stories from this branch of research is not directed to the study of spirituality. This means that at this point at least in the research field there is a data gap.

A counter-story to old age and its problems – the role of spirituality

Of greater interest to this study in the area of gerontology research studies is the concept of counter-stories in old age and the potential role of spirituality in this context. Phoenix and Smith, for example, have provided insight around how older people use physical training to overcome the effects of ageing and how this becomes a counter-story in the ageing context (Phoenix & Smith 2011). A more significant counter-story for this study is the way older persons use spirituality as a means of overcoming the problem of narrative foreclosure (Randall 2012; Bohlmeijer et al. 2011). In this sense, spiritual storytelling becomes a counter-story to that of ageing’s loss of opportunities. There are two key difficulties with this research area for the present study. The published articles by researchers in this field provide useful case study material which is typically interspersed by researcher commentary but which is not a coherent story that becomes available for thematic analysis and interpretation by others. The second difficulty – in the context of this research and not in terms of the original research – is that many of the story collecting contexts are therapeutic or interventionist in approach (Ganzevoort & Bouwer 2007). This is not an appropriate model for the present study and so the scholarly material once again offers insights into the role and varied contexts of spiritual narratives but reveals a gap in the research field with which this study wishes to engage, which is the thematic elements of spiritual experience as evidenced by the spiritual narratives of older individuals who have not been contextualised in settings for faith, health and well-ness as associated with counter-stories for old age and its problems.
Spiritual stories of older contemporary individuals

There is almost no presence in the scholarly material of spiritual stories of contemporary older individuals without the stories being contextualised for faith, for wellbeing, for health and aged care, or for other therapeutic or interventionist purposes. In the broader set of published material there are spiritual stories. There are, for example, websites such as your spiritual story.com and spiritual-experience.com where anyone, including older individuals, can submit or read the spiritual stories of those submitting. The stories posted on these websites tend to be brief (almost paragraph length) and include personal conversion stories, retellings of folk stories and homilies. The websites themselves present as vehicles for marketing and on-selling of “spiritual” product.

There is also a set of published material around the spiritual stories of older individuals. However, these are once more contextualised – in this instance as faith-based stories. Examples of this genre of spiritual story associated with older individuals are Spiritual resiliency in older women (Ramsey & Blieszner 1999) which provides Lutheran faith–based partial narratives of older women; Engaging in ministry (Carlson 1997) which includes a lengthy chapter with a collection of faith-focused stories of older individuals titled “Harvesting the faith stories”; and Johnson & Albans’ God, me and being very old: Stories and spirituality in later life (2013). Some of these stories have been collected using a qualitative narrative methodology, mainly to address the issue around validity of story collection. But as the overall position of the stories is to demonstrate the role (and value) of faith – and at times a specific faith tradition – their use as data is limited for the present study.

2.2.3 Identifying the “form” of the narrative material around spirituality and older individuals

An important issue in identifying potential spiritual narratives of older individuals is: “how” and “in what format” is the spiritual story provided. One body of reported research provides spiritual narrative material in response to surveys (e.g. Nelson-Becker, Nakashima & Canda 2007,); another gains material through structured qualitative interviews (e.g. Hodge 2001, 2005, 2011); and another through the use of other psychological assessment material (e.g. the use of TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) instruments to obtain thematic material around the spirituality of older persons (Gottheil & Groth-Marnat 2011)). Material relating to the spiritual experiences of older individuals gathered in this way is heavily pre-structured. For the purposes of this study, where spirituality is developed from a re-contextualisation of
“lived experience” of older individuals’ perspectives, such pre-structured data compromises the aim of the study.

A more useful approach in terms of this present research is found in that body of scholarly research which provides narrative material around spirituality in case study or interview excerpt formats. In most of these studies there is once more an extended nexus of interest – e.g. old age, spirituality, poverty (Black 1999); and old age, spirituality and spiritual growth (Chinen 1986). The most important set of material around spirituality and old age, which is provided in a case study/interview excerpt format, is that found in the body of work from Elizabeth MacKinlay. Here, a considerable amount of direct narrative is provided and an extensive thematic analysis undertaken. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, my study will rely on some of MacKinlay’s important work (2004) and I will return to her research as I consider scholarly literature in the Australian context. As a general assessment of this part of the scholarly field, it is once more of limited application to this present study. In most cases there is some pre-structuring of the data through survey instruments (e.g. MacKinlay 2004) the narratives are sometimes in “the voice” of the older person or summarised by the researcher (e.g. Ganzovoort & Bouwer 2007); and the thematic analysis (with the notable exception of MacKinlay) is usually limited to a few themes (Black 1999; Randall & Kenyon 2010).

There is some scholarly material which addresses the issue of narrative format directly. Randall and Kenyon (2004) observe that not all text (in the context of narrative gerontology) is narrative in format: “Narrative texts by definition, embrace beginnings, middles and ends”. Like Randall and McKim (2008), they also remark on the intersection of literary studies and narrative gerontology which has been termed by one researcher as “literary gerontology” (Wyatt-Brown 2000) and find that much effort has gone into analysing images of ageing in novels rather than the lived experience of contemporary older individuals. Instead, Randall and Kenyon take us in the direction of literary critical theory and how narrative material is analysed in terms of narrative flow and other structural devices; and also how individual narrators author their stories as a mix of “real”, imagined, individually interpreted and censored themes. These observations are important when developing or listening to the life stories of older individuals and of particular importance is how wisdom or spirituality emerges from the older individual’s narrative. This article by Randall and Kenyon is substantial and complex, although it does not provide any accompanying example of a life narrative in which spirituality/wisdom features and in which narrative elements (as
understood in literary criticism) are employed for analysis. Nevertheless as an analysis of narrative gerontology which focuses on spirituality, this study will rely on its conceptual modelling around the following issues: (i) a narrative needs a format; (ii) life stories of older individuals have basic “themes”, time references, and evidence of story construction; and (iii) wisdom and spirituality appear to be linked.

Another important discussion with regard to the form of narrative is found in a paper by Mankowski and Rappaport (2000). The objective of their research was to examine the spiritual narratives of spiritually based communities. In doing so, they also draw attention to the need for an extended narrative to have a sequence (i.e. a beginning, middle and end). They argue that analysis of narrative should preserve internal organisation, and resist reducing the rich detail of stories to “lists or counts of independent content categories in the narrative” (2000, p. 481). They also argue for the analysis of narratives to reveal the thematic organisation of an individual narrator’s story, which is how the narrator conveys the evaluative effort of their story. Episodes are selected for their significance to the narrator. It is important to capture this emphasis and often emotional value around this thematic aspect of the narrative. Finally in the section of their discussion on the form and analysis of narrative and story they point to the fact that from the field of psychology at least (and probably most other textual analysis contexts), there are few agreed-upon ways to analyse textual material. After considering a range of approaches, they select the thematic analysis approach of Denzin (1989) and Rizzo & Corsaro (1995). It is a decision that this study will also follow in the discussion around appropriate methodologies for the present research.

2.2.4 Identifying the thematic elements of the spiritual stories of older contemporary Australians

For the reasons outlined in the previous section, it is argued that there is effectively no scholarship around identifying the thematic content of the spiritual stories of everyday older Australians captured in a narrative format. The national interest with regard to spiritual stories in the context of old individuals is focused on Aboriginal culture or on bush tales; and most of this story telling is not in a scholarly format (see, for example, Sally Morgan’s *Heartsick for country*, 2008). We also have McColl’s (1989) *Living spiritually* collection. In her book, we find a set of contemporary Australian spiritual narratives which reflect individuals’ conscious and deliberate searches for their personal spirituality. The focus of the collection is on the broad Australian community rather than the aged sector and the collection’s narratives tend to concentrate more narrowly on the New Age movement. Once more, this
material is not developed as part of a contribution to scholarship. However, we do have the work of Elizabeth MacKinlay, which is both focused at collecting spiritual material from older Australians and at thematic analysis in the context of academic scholarship. There are limitations associated with MacKinlay’s work for this study, which I will discuss at the conclusion of this passage. However, the contribution she makes to the field in terms of this study’s interest – and indeed internationally – is major.

**Thematic elements of the spiritual stories of older contemporary Australians – the work of Elizabeth MacKinlay:**

The substantial body of work by Elizabeth MacKinlay is dedicated to examining spirituality in a range of health care contexts – especially from the perspectives of older individuals and individuals with a disability. Her work views old age and disability primarily through the lens of holistic care for the older and/or disability framed individual; and she challenges deficit models associated with this demographic. Of particular interest to this present study is her 2004 work *The spiritual dimension of ageing*. The areas of interest and associated findings that intersect with this present study are:

- the present social context of ageing and spirituality
- the importance of lived experience and activity
- the focus on the “voice” of the older participants and their spiritual stories
- the use of Scriptural references
- the thematic content of spiritual material voiced at interview by older individuals within the contemporary Australian setting.

It needs to be noted that the overall aim of MacKinlay’s research as published in *The spiritual dimension of ageing* is to “map the spiritual dimension of a number of independently living older adults” (2004, p. 8) and from the data, develop an assessment tool for measuring the spiritual needs of older adults. While there is some overlap between her research and that of the present study, the aims of the two sets of research are distinctly different. My research aims to identify the thematic content of the spiritual stories which have a narrative structure, and to identify how the narrated spiritual experiences articulate with the thematic content of selected Biblical narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. From this point of clarification, the following points of intersection between this study and MacKinlay’s scholarship are identified.
1. **The present social context of ageing and spirituality:** MacKinlay’s research is undertaken in the same social and demographic context that I have identified for this present study. Old age is largely viewed in Australia and other Western societies as a social and economic burden, and deficit models of being old are entrenched in the media, marketing and even health care industries. The older individual’s engagement with their spirituality however conceptualised, is seen as important for challenging the current perspective on older people.

2. **The importance of lived experience and activity:** MacKinlay’s participants (who were almost all from the Third Age cohort) actively engaged in a wide range of activities which were owned as providing meaning (and so spiritual in nature) for their lives going forward. The range of activities included “religious” activities (going to church: participating in liturgy and communion, singing in choirs, prayer; reading the Bible; sitting in churches); “otherness” experiences; study; meditation; awe of nature experiences; listening to music; painting; writing).

3. **The focus on the “voice” of the older participants and their spiritual stories:** MacKinlay uses a multi-methodology design, which includes in-depth interviews with 24 participants. She analyses the interview material for thematic content and discusses the interview material as excerpts throughout the published research. Her use of interview excerpts is frequently generous in terms of the material provided. Overall, there is a clear evidence of this being “voiced” research but due to the dispersed nature of the quoted excerpts there is little sense of the individual narrator responding to the questions around spirituality.

4. **The use of scriptural references:** although it is not provided within the aims of her research, MacKinlay does refer on one occasion to the Scriptures. This is in the context of discussing wisdom in Scripture (2004, pp. 154–155). Here, she references the view commonly held by literary critics and pastors about old age in the Bible – namely that a dichotomy exists between old age as wisdom and old age as frailty. She also uses Job, Anna and Simeon to support this position. I will argue in later chapters in this study that such a dichotomy indeed has a structural purpose within the Scriptures but that old age has a much more nuanced role within both the Old and New Testaments in relation to human spirituality.

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5. *The thematic content of spiritual material* voiced at interview by older individuals within the contemporary Australian setting: the most unique feature of MacKinlay’s work is her extensive analysis of the interview material provided by older Australian individuals about their spirituality.

In her reporting of voice, lived experiences and thematic spiritual material associated with contemporary older Australians, MacKinlay has made a major contribution to this study and others in the field of spirituality and ageing. However, there are also limitations associated with MacKinlay’s work for my research; and I argue that MacKinlay’s study contains the following methodological problems which limit its application in my present research.

1. **Pre-shaping:** MacKinlay’s research is pre-structured in terms of the Spiritual Health Inventory for Elderly People (SHIE) that was employed prior to interviewing the participants. MacKinlay notes this pre-shaping as a potential problem (2004, pp. 32–34). Moreover, this pre-shaping was effected by an assessment instrument (the SHIE), which was found to be an unreliable tool for comparison between the two data sets.

2. **Full articulation:** The pre-structuring of participant responses also leaves the spiritual material obtained through interview as excerpts rather than narratives. For my study, I am seeking to obtain a complete spiritual narrative, which then may be made available for thematic analysis.

3. **In-depth interviews:** Given the importance of the in-depth interviews – especially in the light of a compromised spirituality assessment tool – MacKinlay does not provide a consolidated set of interview questions associated with the interview with the 24 participants. Although in another similar study around spirituality for Fourth Age older individuals (MacKinlay, 2006b) she provides two questionnaires and a set of questions for in-depth interview and client reflection purposes. However, these later forms/guides still reference the pre-shaped and potentially compromised outcomes of the 2001 research. Given the importance of the in-depth interviews for generating the data for the spiritual modelling, MacKinlay does not provide a consolidated set of material against each participant. In this circumstance there is a loss of “voice” and the thematic material potentially loses opportunities for more extensive analysis.
4. **Focus on holistic aged care:** Apart from the methodological issues which present limitations around the use of her work in this present study, MacKinlay's work is further limited for this study’s purposes by its focus on the spiritual material as part of a needs-based strategy for holistic aged care. While I argue that the findings of this research have applicability in aged and health care contexts, this study’s aims are not solely contextualised in these health and aged care environments.

## 2.2.5 Critique of literature relevant to Research Question 1

Research Question 1 for this study of spirituality and ageing asks:

> What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

In this overview of the relevant scholarly literature and pastoral material, it is argued that:

1. There is a genre of spiritual stories either written by or about older individuals. These are not located in scholarly research but rather in faith based writings for a general audience.
2. The scholarly narrative material associated with older individuals in terms of spirituality is overwhelmingly contextualised in terms of health, social work, wellbeing and care issues.
3. The format of the narrative gerontology material as found in the scholarly material is rarely in a narrative configuration. This can mean a loss of “voice” and a potential loss of emphasis and meaning.
4. The analysis of spiritual narratives of older individuals provides limited thematic information. Where a literary critical approach to narrative gerontology is evident, the arguments are theoretical rather than evidence based.
5. There are no spiritual narratives voiced by contemporary older Australians pertaining to their spiritual experiences.
6. There are no spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australian individuals that have been collected without pre-shaping and analysed for their thematic content associated with spiritual experiences according to an appropriate qualitative methodology.
7. There is no Australian study that uses a cohort of older Australian individuals to re-contextualise the concept of “spirituality” for contemporary use through the identification and analysis of their spiritual experiences and narratives.
8. There is no data set of spiritual narratives in a narrative format that evidence the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians.

As a result of this survey of scholarly literature around narrative gerontology and spirituality, both internationally and within Australia, it is clear that there is a gap in the discursive field. This study aims to address this gap by identifying and thematically analysing the spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians.

2.3 Literature review of scholarly literature and pastoral material relevant to Research Question 2

Research Question 2:
What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

2.3.1 Introduction
The applicable literature for Research Question 2 has a focus on the scholarship associated with the study of old age in the Bible and with the study of the narratives of the old protagonists – Abraham, Job, Anna and Simeon. This review of the applicable literature also considers material which is found in the public domain and which is largely pastoral in its focus. This latter tranche of material is typically located on internet sites where pastors and social workers in a faith context provide sermons and community information around their particular group’s faith tradition and spirituality. This material sometimes takes a Biblical theme pertaining to the selected old protagonists of this study – Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna – and uses it for a sermon or community purpose.

The task of identifying content and thematic elements in the spiritual narratives around Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna is concentrated on the relationship of these old protagonists and their relationship to their God. The identification of narrative content and themes in the Biblical texts is necessary for analysing how older Australians’ narratives of everyday spiritual experiences articulate with Biblical narratives where old age has symbolic value. This section of the literature review is organised as follows:

1. General thematic elements of Biblical scholarship and pastoral material referencing old age.
2. Current scholarship with regard to Abraham in terms of thematic analysis relating to Abraham’s relationship with his God.

3. Current scholarship with regard to Anna and Simeon in terms of thematic analysis relating to Anna and Simeon’s relationship with their God.

4. Current scholarship with regard to Job in terms of thematic analysis relating to Job’s relationship with his God.

2.3.2 General thematic elements of Biblical scholarship and pastoral material referencing old age

Contemporary references to old age in the context of Biblical reference

Christian theological studies with regard to old age and ageing are generally community action oriented. However, there are researchers and commentators who concentrate their attention on the Biblical significance of ageing and the experiences of the old individual. Some of these commentators use inspirational Biblical references associated with ageing as the platform from which to argue for appropriate social and political responses to the circumstances of age and ageing. An example of this is the Simeon and Anna Project (Keyes 2000) based in the United Kingdom. This manner of commentary around Biblical reference to ageing seeks to draw attention to the social issues of old age in contemporary society by linking the older person in today’s world with that of admired old individuals in the Biblical world.

Spiritual leaders of the faith traditions also use Biblical references around age to make social statements. For example, the late Pope John Paul II and former Archbishop Rowan Williams have drawn attention to aged individuals as spiritual resources (Pope John Paul II 2005; Williams 2005). Both spiritual leaders reflect on the spiritual work in which older individuals are called to engage and argue for the broader society to provide appropriate support for older persons to undertake this spiritual engagement. Both spiritual leaders consider it to be a mark of our own spiritual “maturity” (Williams 2005, p. 5) and humanity to relate to ageing individuals in this fashion. However, as these insights are in the form of sermons and Lenten messages, there is little expansion of what might actually be the spiritual gifts developed by the aged for oncoming generations.

Biblical exegesis

Analyses of events and characters around old age in the Bible conducted for scriptural exegesis can result in simple list building (Dew n.d.) but generally the research field deals
with the following: (i) age characteristics and the Biblical “code of conduct” towards the elderly, (ii) old age as witness to humankind’s full involvement in material and God’s creation, (iii) old age as a reward for a life committed to God, and (iv) role and “message” of significant old Biblical characters.

**Age characteristics and the Biblical “code of conduct” towards the elderly**

The Biblical perspectives on the aged and ageing drawn from the Scriptures (Harris 2008; Stagg 1981) comment on obligations towards the elderly and social practices. These researchers tend to list characteristics and link them to age (e.g. age and wisdom) rather than provide significant analysis of Scripture. This approach is evident in the work of Dulin (1988), who concentrates on bringing out the ageing themes of the Scriptures such as the longevity of Biblical characters, physical and mental dispositions of the aged, and old age and reflection. Similarly, more recent work by Cohen (2010) provides a Biblical list of physical impairments associated with ageing. This is argued to be the unsentimental reality found in the Scriptures, which historically was off-set by honouring the elderly. While in contemporary society, physical decline is off-set by “sage-ing” (ibid., p. 81) and by the social commitment to aged care.

**Old age as witness to humankind’s full involvement in material and God’s creation**

Westerman (1989) and Mundahl (1986) argue that part of the significance of old age in the Bible is that it acts as a marker for humankind’s participation in the rhythms of Nature and hence the fullness of God’s Creation. These scholars also point to the notion of the wisdom gained through maturing which is passed on as a blessing to the young. The weakness of this Scriptural analysis is that the blessing or wisdom is left largely unarticulated. There is no further analysis to suggest the nature of the blessing or the content of the wisdom that is generationally passed down. Neither is there evidence offered to confirm that the young benefit or behave differently because of the blessing or the conferred wisdom of the old.

**Old age as a reward for a life committed to God**

Some commentators argue that in the context of the Scriptures, old age has to be viewed as a blessing from God because it indicates divine favour (Knowles n.d.). Other authors address this problem of the decay of old age by arguing that the promises of Scripture give the aged “… power to cope realistically with disability, suffering and other problems that may come their way” (Moberg 2001, p. 7).
Role and “message” of significant “old” Biblical characters

Scriptural theologians were alert to the fact that many of the key figures in the Bible were old males. Most of the Scriptural research concentrating on the linkage between age and the Patriarchs tended to be in the honouring tradition where individuals such as Abraham and Moses were honoured as great men. Their great age was seen as consistent with and symbolic of their wisdom (Britt 2004). Kirsch (2000) attempted to provide a different analysis as to what elders represented but his efforts to prove his alternative interpretive reading of the ambiguous character of the Patriarch Moses were compromised by his stylistic sensationalism. This was regrettable as Kirsch’s work contained important insights into the character problems associated with Moses and what this might mean as Biblical exegesis around the Mosaic Law. The limitations of scholars with regard to age and women in the context of Scriptural analysis, was again evident in the Moses story with regard to Miriam. If it was significant for Moses to be old then the significance of Miriam as his older sister needed to be addressed. The literature was largely silent on such matters. The work of Fischer (Fischer 1985) was an exception to this situation. Fischer used the lives of older women in the Bible to illuminate the experiences of contemporary ageing for women.

The primary and ongoing discussions around ageing in the Scriptures currently centre upon: (i) details of the characteristics of the older person in the Scriptures, both from a physical decline and social position perspective (the decline in mental and physical powers is presented in particularly dramatic ways in such narratives as those associated with King David in his decline); (ii) old age as a blessing from God in terms both of wisdom gained and number of years experienced in God’s creation (e.g. the Elders are frequent participants in the Biblical narratives). From this interpretive perspective, it can be argued that the Biblical narratives are working with a thematic tension around old age and ageing, where generational, reflective wisdom is opposed with physical and mental impotence. In part, this is the challenge with which Elihu presents his elders in the Job narrative – “I am young in years, and you are aged” (Job 32:6). As a background dynamic, this is a powerful challenge to the reader of the Scriptures. Humankind’s journey into old age offers opportunities around personal growth and insight. However, the associated danger of falling into meaningless routines of habit and ritual are also always in attendance. The dichotomous relationships between old-age-as-wisdom and old-age-as-infirmity is a thematic insights that is important for this study and will be relied upon. However there is further exegetical material associated with old age other than the direct thematic correspondence between old age and a characteristic or condition. This thematic information is located in analysing what the
specifically older individual does or how that older individual acts in relationship with their God. It will be argued that it is from this exegetical focus that a highly nuanced and contemporary Biblical perspective around spirituality emerges.

Recent scholarship around the stories of Abraham, Job, and Simeon and Anna, contains a mix of exegetical approaches. Only part of this scholarship is interested in thematic material. I will approach the literature around Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna with a general analysis of the profile of the recent research field applicable to each old protagonist. In most cases, the field literature will not apply to my study because of the aforesaid multiplicity of Biblical approaches around history, social customs, potential authorship, and linguistic analysis. I will note where studies will be relied upon for my analysis of the narratives. Where the scholarship is to be relied upon, I will expand my discussion to argue the extent of my reliance upon the findings of the identified Biblical study as reported in the peer-reviewed article.

2.3.3 Specific thematic elements in Biblical scholarship and pastoral material referencing Abraham

Discursive activity around the Abraham narrative in the Book of Genesis over the past decade or so has largely concentrated on four key issues arising from the narrative. These issues include the inter-faith potential in the Abraham narrative; the use of Abraham in ministry messages; the potential historical background to the narrative and associated implication for textual development; and the debates around theodicy, concerning in particular the Hagar episode and the episode relating to the sacrifice of Isaac.

The interfaith potential of the Abraham narratives is explored for example in the *The tent of Abraham: Stories of hope and peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Chittister, Douglas-Klotz, & Waskow 2006) by significant contemporary theologians from Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. The authors seek to find in the relationships of the key characters explanations for the behaviours associated with the expulsion of Hagar, even to the point of suggesting that the expulsion may have been a staged event between Hagar and Sarah. The authors’ final goal is to see in the complex of relationships a platform from which interfaith reconciliations can be developed. This contemporary approach to Abraham uses the tale as a creative starting point to deal with difficult contemporary social and political issues. Similar interfaith arguments are explored by researchers seeking to identify the historical background where Christianity separated itself from Judaism and the role which reference to
Abraham played in this separation (Runesson 2011) Such interfaith potential does not go unchallenged. Levinson (2012) offers just such a challenge by returning to the textual material to claim that the Scriptures provide insufficient evidence for these interfaith readings.

The use of the Abraham narrative as material for ministry is exemplified in an internet essay and podcast from the Cathedral of St Phillip (Cathedral of St Phillip 2011). Here Abraham’s spiritual journeying is discussed and used as a pointer to our contemporary situation. Throntveit (2008) also uses his internet preaching on Abraham to argue that God always keeps God’s promise to humankind. While scriptural material is used, it largely ignores the more difficult issues around both God and Abraham, such as the incest themes. The use of Abraham as an inspirational model is also found in some contemporary leadership and management material (Cf Friedman & Langbert 2000). Once more, these scholars ignore the complex and “dark” material at play in the Abraham narrative.

History and textual construction is another key interest of the current discursive community. Scholars such as Römer (2013), Niehaus (2013) and Hendel (2004) are primarily interested in the Abraham Scriptural material from the perspective of Abraham as a historical figure situated in the social and legal practices of the ancient Middle East. The often aligned issue of the construction of the scriptural material from various authors in ancient times, or discussion around ancient language, is also a focus of scholarship characterised by this group (Letellier 1995; Zalcmann 2005). I will not rely on the approaches outlined here as they do not address the aim of this study, which is represented in part by Research Question 2. This research question involves identifying thematic elements in the scriptural narratives of Abraham, Anna and Simeon, and Job.

Literary critical analysis and the thematic focus of my study found best support in the discursive effort around theodicy and its implications for the Abraham–God relationship. This offers the most useful thematic information for my research. Studies where the various commentators seek to explain those passages from the Abraham narrative that are confronting provide the most expansive discussion of thematic issues around the nature of the Abraham–God relationship. Such confronting narrative episodes include in particular the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Sherwood 2014; Chittister, Douglas-Klotz & Waskow 2006), and God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac and Abraham’s preparedness to do so (Kant 2003).
Moberly (2000) identifies the centrality of the God relationship with key Biblical narrative figures as essential to an understanding of the Christian faith and, in a similar fashion to others, takes up the sacrifice of Isaac and the Hagar episodes as important to the way faith is shaped. His exposition of the sacrifice and testing themes are pertinent to my later discussion and will be relied upon. Some commentators argue in a somewhat straightforward manner that the confronting situations are simply God testing Abraham and Abraham proving his faithfulness and so being rewarded (Kuruvilla 2012). Others such as Kant argue that we should directly address the difficulties in the text because “Christians and Jews face a similar task of squaring a deity capable of violence and extraordinary harshness with the commitment found in both faiths to living a moral and humane life” (Kant 2003, p. 79). Kant argues that we dishonour God and the text more by not facing up to the difficulties than by trying to work with their meaning.

Those scholars who identify that Abraham and his God reveal their dark and even violent nature in the difficult passages reveal some important themes. The destructive relationship with the Feminine, for example, is argued by Phyllis Tribble as an important theme in the context of these narratives. She also points in her later analysis of Tamar’s murderous treatment by Judah to thematic information around the Abrahamic line’s increasing failure to relate to the line of “royal” women (Tribble, 1984). While this particular “royal women” theme is not a major line of argument to be pursued in this present study, the failure of the Abrahamic line to establish an appropriate relationship with the Feminine is one of the barriers that I will argue stands in the way of establishing a right relationship with God. Gunn and Fewell (1993) have also explored this territory, pointing to a major thematic narrative theme but nevertheless responding in terms of outrage rather than asking interpretive questions. However, even this more textually focused group of scholars does not typically reference in their analyses such embedded textual themes as Abraham’s family’s apparently confronting incest lines. There is clearly meaning to be found in such references and, as Kant (2003) observes, this is best done by meeting the challenge of the text rather than ignoring it. Some of these challenges and their meaning will be met in my literary critical reading of the Abraham narrative.

In terms of the current scholarship available to my study of thematic elements in the Abraham narrative, I will rely on the following findings: the centrality of the God–Abraham dialogue relationship in understanding faith/spirituality; the problematic character of both
God and Abraham; the compromised relationship with the Feminine; and the centrality of moral questions around testing, sacrifice and inheritance.

2.3.4 Specific thematic elements in Biblical scholarship and pastoral material referencing Simeon and Anna

Generally the current discursive literature accepts the view that the Presentation in the Temple is a demonstration of Christ’s parents acting in accordance with the Mosaic Law. Certainly in terms of Christian church ritual, this view is perpetuated through Candlemas remaining part of the Christmas cycle (Kreitzer 2004, p. 73). However, as I will argue in the literary critical interpretation of this study, there is a case to be made that in fact the opposite is the case: the Presentation in the Temple is actually a challenge to the Mosaic Law rather than an act of conformity. To progress this latter interpretation, I will rely on the analysis of the Presentation in the Temple by Seth Ward (2003). Ward’s analysis concentrates on demonstrating how this non-conformism is evidenced, and he does not continue with the thematic and interpretive significance of his analysis. I will carry Ward’s research into an argument around the paradigmatic shift in human spirituality, which is developed through the Lucan narrative.

Simeon and Anna are dealt with in contemporary literature as a significant pairing and as discrete characters. As a couple, they are used in the context of ministry as exemplars of patient faith: “(B)y their very being they embody holy aging” (Guenther 2007, pp. 18–20). Some commentators point to the importance of gender balance in the couple – both male and female are present to witness the Christ and his new saving message. This ministry message is sometimes found in the way church ministry projects use Simeon and Anna as figureheads for initiatives in aged care. The UK-based Simeon and Anna Project (Keyes 2000) is a good example of this. Other commentators on the Simeon and Anna pairing observe that, in Simeon, the reader is shown a homeland Jewish community member, while in Anna, an outsider from the Northern part of the kingdom is drawn into narrative. In other words, Simeon and Anna speak narratively to a unified community (Bauckham 1997, pp. 101–119).

When the two characters are discussed as discrete identities, Simeon is viewed as the faithful Jew who stands as witness to the coming of the Messiah. Of greater significance are his words to Mary, which appear to foretell the suffering that both she and Christ will have to bear in the future. Mary together with her journey to faithfulness is seen as the primary focus of Simeon – Simeon’s words reveal suffering, and support Mary’s “life long striving
towards faith” (Nachef 2000, pp. 124–125). There is little in the current peer-reviewed literature in which Simeon is discussed in ways which are useful to this present thematic study. Although I would argue that Vinson’s (2014) close reading of textual references to God in Luke suggests that the formulaic association between Simeon and God hints at the tradition of Mosaic Law carried by this character

Anna has also received specific commentary. As with Simeon, she is in some cases interpreted in a simple fashion as: “Anna is a prophetess that bears witness to the redeemer. ... She was very old and spent all her time worshiping God by fasting and praying at the temple. Upon seeing the baby Jesus she praised God; she joyfully told of the child to everyone in the community seeking deliverance for Jerusalem” (Strong in Faith n.d.). And this simple reading of the Anna character is extended to where Anna is seen as preparing the way for Jesus’ Gospel and to act as a role model for female preachers today (Reid 2009, pp. 37–47). Anna, however, has been discussed in ways that I will rely on in the later chapters. The feminist hermeneutic applied to Anna by Levine (2011) begins to capture the more complex and revolutionary aspects of this Lukan character. Levine observes that the strengthening presence of the Feminine can be discerned in Anna having a named father (“Phanuel”) and not a named husband. The father therefore has to be the key relationship upon which to focus. A further link to the Feminine is found in her intertextual relationship with the “warrior” Judith. These latter commentaries on Anna will find sympathy in my literary critical analysis of Anna’s meaning within the Presentation in the Temple narrative.

In terms of the current scholarship available to my study of thematic elements in the Presentation in the Temple narrative, I will rely on the findings that (i) the narrative is part of the counter–Mosaic Law theme (and as such counter to a mediated relationship with God); and (ii) the prophet Anna represents a complex of issues around the theme of the role of the Feminine in the Divinity.

### 2.3.5 Specific thematic elements in Biblical scholarship and pastoral material referencing Job

The *Job* narrative receives considerable scholarship attention. Contemporary commentary is expansive but appears to settle across the following major areas: the structural integrity of the narrative; ecological perspectives; feminist perspectives; and questions of morality and engagement with the Divine.
First, the structural integrity of the narrative: there is a major strand of Job scholarship, which challenges the structural integrity of the narratives. Basically this is the argument which debates whether introductory and concluding episodes should be included in the “poetry” of the dialogues. Girard (cited in Seow 2013, p. 232) believes the dialogues should be privileged over the prologue and epilogue – both from a literary and theological perspective. This allows The Book of Job to be seen as a complex discussion around sacrifice, and as such a prefiguring of Christ. An opposing point of view in this structural argument is represented by Prideaux (2012), who argues for the textual integrity of the narrative, which in his view allows a broader moral universe to be explored.

Second, ecological perspectives: another field of contemporary commentary around Job focuses on the ecological implications of the narrative. Musser (2012, p. 292), for example, sees contemporary society’s disregard for its environment being prefigured in Job’s failed attempt to have the world be “his way”. She notes, “Just as Job experienced the futility of ordering creation through personal righteousness, so too should we expect to suffer the consequences of our flawed actions to order and domesticate our environment”. Even Leviathan is called into the ecological perspective as a reflection of near extinct creatures.

Third, feminist insights into the role of Job’s wife and daughters: commentators who apply a feminist hermeneutic to the Job narrative tend to concentrate their attentions on Job’s wife and daughters – although Chittister regards Job as a feminist story. Her study Job’s daughters: Women and power (1990), makes the powerful point that Job in his disenfranchised condition reflects the condition of women in contemporary society. Job’s complaint and condition is then the call of the marginalised and powerless. Another view of Job’s wife, in particular, involves attempts to provide a biography from the scant few lines in the narrative. Legaspi (2008) provides an excellent summary of this kind of critical effort. Finally, there are finely researched studies that seek to use the thin textual material to illustrate the potential power in Job’s wife’s position. Magdalene, for example, uses both feminist and legal lenses to show that Job’s wife is the only character with the courage initially to put backbone into Job’s reactions. Job’s wife is clear and direct, unlike the other wordy characters, and interestingly this is underscored by her being “the only character who does not have formulaic testament markers associated with their words” (Magdalene 2006, p. 232). It is also true that Job’s wife’s initial words to Job⁴ “curse (or bless) God and die”

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⁴ NRSV Job 2:9 footnote.
have resulted in many exegetical efforts. Suomala (2011, pp. 397–408) sees this perplexing difficulty of the curse or the blessing as emblematic of the interpretational difficulties surrounding the Job narrative – “only by centuries of revisionism changing Job to the good patient sufferer was sense made of him”.

*Fourth, the moral positions – and their justification – on the part of Job’s friends, on the part of Job, and on God’s part:* this is where the major exegetical effort in relation to the Job narrative is applied (Kynes 2013; Tietz 2012). Phillips (2008, pp. 31–43) asks “are Job’s friends mean spirited and religiously narrow minded” or do they as Newsom argues “inhabit a different moral imagination”? To the question of Job’s radical complaint against God being justified, Gerhad von Rad (cited in Lockwood 2011) answered “All commentators find the divine speech highly scandalous, in so far as it bypasses completely Job’s particular concerns, and because in it God in no way condescends to any kind of self interpretation”. And while many voice similar concerns about God as a bully, there is almost an equal critical chorus which finds that God as “the Creator is not accountable to the creature” and that “God cannot be placed under any obligation to man” (Jackson 2010, p. 167). And finally there is an air of anti-climax associated with the concluding passages of the narrative – as Seow (2013, p. 108) observes “(T)here is no answer to the problem of innocent suffering, no answer to the issue of divine justice with which the book has wrestled. Still the voices have been heard, and now life goes on.”

The Book of Job then provides the reader with a rich and complex narrative, which allows for many perspectives. This present study has a particular interest in how not only Job transforms but how God transforms; and this is an area around which there is not a great deal of discussion. God tends to be an unknowable and static phenomenon in the body of discursive effort. If this perception of God is put aside – as I will do in this study – then another voice speaking to humankind’s spirituality may be heard. Overall then, in terms of the current scholarship available to my study of thematic elements in the Job narrative, I will rely on the following findings: the Job narrative possesses textual integrity; the juxtaposition of Job’s pitiful condition and the moralising of his old friends constitutes thematic material relating to the compromised nature of mediated Divine relationships; and the role of the Feminine in the human–Divine relationship.
2.3.6 Critique of literature relevant to Research Question 2

Research Question 2 for this study of spirituality and ageing asks:

What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

In this overview of the relevant scholarly literature and pastoral material, it is argued that with regard to the scriptural and pastoral perspectives on ageing, the emphasis has been on pastoral and regional ministry, historical, linguistic, and socio-political interests. The tantalising references to the spiritual legacies argued to be the grace of old age receive a largely superficial examination across the Old and New Testaments. I have also argued that exegetical effort associated with the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Anna and Simeon provides a relatively small amount of thematic information. From this small cluster of research articles, I will rely and expand on the following identified themes: (i) the centrality of the unmediated God relationship as central to human spirituality, (ii) the centrality of establishing an appropriate relationship with the Feminine in the Divinity, and (iii) the centrality of moral questioning in the God–human relationship.

As a result of this survey of scholarly literature around scriptural thematic material concerning old age generally and the old protagonist as represented by Abraham, Job, Anna and Simeon specifically, it is clear that there is a gap in the discursive field. This gap can be described as (i) a general under-representation of hermeneutical studies employing a literary critical lens, and (ii) an under representation of studies considering the symbolic (and so thematic) value of actions by older individuals, (iii) a failure to recognise the symbolic value of the role and actions of old females, and (iv) the failure to address the symbolic value of narrative episodes which confront the reader with moral dilemmas and uncertainties. This study aims to address this gap by identifying and thematically analysing the Biblical narratives from these perspectives.
2.4 Literature review of scholarly literature and pastoral material relevant to Research Question 3

Research Question 3:

Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

2.4.1 Introduction

The applicable literature for Research Question 3 has a focus on disciplinary scholarship associated with spirituality and ageing. First, this section reports research on old age and spirituality across selected social science fields. Second, this section reports scholarship on old age and spirituality from a broad theological view of spirituality which reflects but does not specifically reference Schneiders’ anthropological approach to spirituality.

This section of the literature review will be undertaken in the following stages:

First, selected social science scholarship, including:

- psychological models of human development and the role of spirituality
- medical or therapeutic perspectives on spirituality in old age and ageing
- other social science perspectives on ageing research.

Second, theological scholarship employing a broad approach to spirituality with a focus on ‘lived experience’, including:

- pastoral care approaches for supporting older adults in the Church community
- the role of women in contributing to spirituality for aged individuals
- the transformative experience of individuals working with older/dying individuals
- spirituality and ageing in the Australian context.
2.4.2 Selected social science scholarship

Spirituality and old age is increasingly of interest for many social science areas. No claim is made to reflect the full spread of academic activity in this literature review. Rather, the review will concentrate on those fields where the intersection of spirituality and old age are judged to have particular relevance to this present study.

2.4.2.1 Psychological models of human development and spirituality

The theoretical basis for the potential of spirituality in successful ageing has been the research focus of a number of psychologists who have examined the personal growth opportunities presented in the later stages of life (Biggs 1993). This concept is of course in part a legacy of the work of Jung (Jung 1967; Hall & Nordby 1973; Patton 2006). The process of spiritual growth throughout life, and in particular in the later stages of life, has been conceptualised as gerotranscendence by Tornstam (2011, 2005). It can be argued that gerotranscendence is the dominant model on ageing and spirituality to emerge from contemporary research. It describes the shift in focus away from the material to issues of life’s meaning and personal significance in a cosmic context. Studies associated with this theoretical position have examined such areas as dream patterns of aged persons and changed perceptions of time by aged persons. The studies argue that such dreams and different time experiences contain geotranscendent material, which can be used in ongoing psychological development (Moody 2005; McFadden & Atchley 2001)

A similar theory linking ageing, spirituality and human psychological development has been described in the work of Joan Erikson (Brown & Lowis 2003). This aspect of transcendent model development appears to set itself against one of the other major theories of psychological development, that of Erik Erikson (Barnum 2003). Erikson’s somewhat bleak eight stages of human development see life in extreme old age caught up in a backwards-looking process (Barnum 2003, pp. 51–52). Joan Erikson’s model, however, suggests nine stages of life with the ninth stage being that of extreme later life (Brown & Lowis 2003). Using Joan Erikson’s model, Brown and Lowis undertook a study of over 130 older women to determine if the challenges of later life were addressed by ongoing psychological development. Their findings would suggest “human beings remain in a situation of potential psychological and spiritual growth throughout their life span, regardless of how many years that may last” (Brown & Lowis 2003, p. 425). Psychological research extended these findings and argued that older individuals kept their lives open to new opportunities and interest through personal story telling (Brown & Lowis 2003). Other researchers pursuing this line of
2.4.2.2 Medical and therapeutic perspectives on ageing and spirituality

The medical or therapeutic body of research associated with ageing and spirituality provides another major field of current research effort. Areas under investigation include:

- spirituality and health of ageing individuals
- spirituality and wellbeing in old age
- spirituality and palliative care
- the impact of the research field on public health policies and funding.

**Spirituality and health of ageing individuals**: considerable data has emerged linking an individual’s engagement with their spirituality and that individual’s healthy ageing (Levin 1993; Koenig 1994; McFadden & Atchley 2001; McFadden & McFadden, 2011; Stuart-Hamilton 2006). The outcomes of such reports tend to focus on establishing the factual link between spirituality and health in old age rather than ascertaining why spirituality supports good health. Notwithstanding this situation, a number of researchers have been active in establishing how spiritual beliefs and practices support mental health wellbeing. For example, studies by Klinefelter and by Davis detail the role of spirituality in combating depression in older persons (Klinefelter 1984; Davis 2002). Other studies report links between key health indicators in older adults such as low blood pressure and religious activity (Hermann 2004).

**Spirituality and wellbeing in old age**: in addition to the links between spirituality and health in old age, the research field is particularly active with regard to age and the broader issue of quality of life. In a major study undertaken for the European Forum on Population Ageing Research, Brown and Bowling together with a team of fellow researchers undertook to address the current research consensus on what constitutes quality of life for our ageing population. The resultant report: *Models of quality of life: A taxonomy, overview and systematic review of the literature* (Brown, Bowling & Flynn 2004) is an important detailing of models of quality of life and the components of quality of life as nominated by older persons. One of the components of quality of life so nominated was religion—spirituality. This was the case for both healthy individuals and individuals with experiences of illness. Older individuals with limited independence also identified religious or spiritual practice as important for their
quality of life. Religion or spirituality was particularly and understandably important for those with cancer and the terminally ill (Brown, Bowling & Flynn 2004, p. 82). Other research in Europe and America continues to support these findings (Lowry & Conco 2002; Lawrence et al. 2006).

A major Australian study into spirituality and wellbeing is reported by Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010). The study sources its data from two major surveys. The first survey involved the Wellbeing and Security Survey undertaken in 2002 by Edith Cowan University Centre for Social Research together with the Australian Centre on Quality of Life (Deakin University), Anglicare (Sydney) and NCLS Research. The second survey involved the 2009 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, pp. 4, 6). This is an important study in terms of the numbers of participants and the range of issues surveyed. A key observation includes the fact that Australians have a wide range of beliefs about life and they use many different spiritual pathways and styles to address questions of meaning. The researchers identified the population groups as reflective Christians, uncritical Christians, the alternatively spiritual, and the secular. They then considered well-being to operate on a personal and community level. Their final analysis confirmed that for the Australian community “how we make sense of life can have an impact on both personal and communal well-being” (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, p. 146). The study however leaves open the question as to the precise nature of the nexus between ageing, spirituality and well-being. This unresolved issue is claimed to be largely due to the perceived increase in secularisation in the Australian population. (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, pp. 62-63). However their research is compromised because of the definitions used with key variables such as religious, conservatively Christian, and spiritual rather than because of issues around increasing secularization. Religion and spirituality are sometimes used interchangeably even though the researchers acknowledge that these were not equivalent variables. In summary, the research undertaken by Kaldor, Hughes & Black sometimes uses religion and religious in a pejorative way which is undeclared and unexamined. Yet it is evident that professed Christians from the major faith traditions might be open to a rich even ecstatic set of spiritual experiences. While not necessarily denying the observation that the uncritical and unreflective approach tends to shut down spiritual nature, it is also true that a modern spiritual hero Martin Luther King was a Baptist Minister who spoke to Jesus in his kitchen (Martin Luther King cited in Denzin, 1989, p. 15).
Spirituality and palliative care: the importance of spirituality in palliative care approaches is perhaps one of the most commonly accepted roles for spirituality for ageing persons. Helping the aged or dying to cope has produced an important literary genre around spirituality. It encourages individuals in the last stage of life to employ transformative imagery drawn from personal and cultural contexts in order to provide meaning and comfort for their circumstances. Here the pioneering work of Kubler-Ross (1969) has been followed by major contributions by Byock (1997) and Singh (1998). An Australian study that examined how the terminally ill individual experiences spirituality drew upon the case of a 55-year-old woman in the final stage of Frederick’s Ataxia. The study, which applies to both aged individuals and individuals with a disability from whatever condition, suggests that relationship in the sense of connection with others was central to a meaningful life for these individuals. Relationship and meaning were also central to the context acquiring a spiritual dimension (McGrath & Newell 2004). A more recent and extended study on the experience of spirituality in palliative care in Australia is provided by Penman, Oliver & Harrington (2009), where palliative care clients and care givers were interviewed to obtain data on their experience of spirituality. Spirituality was associated with ‘God’, ‘coping’ and ‘religion’.

Public health policies and funding: the medical–therapeutic interest in spirituality and ageing has a direct impact on public health policies and funding. The issue of spirituality and aged care has resulted in the National Training Package for Certificate III in Aged Care Work having compulsory competencies set against supporting spiritual wellbeing (Croft 2013). All personal care workers in aged care in Australia, by virtue of their training, should be aware of and sensitive to spirituality as an issue and potential need of their aged clients. Similarly, Koenig (2004) reports that more than half of America’s 126 medical schools offer courses in spirituality and health, thereby providing an expansion of health professionals’ spiritual knowledge and skills to support their own professional practice. Finally, major reports on quality of life issues for older individuals – such as that developed by the European Forum (Brown, Bowling & Flynn 2004) and by the UK’s Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy (The Leveson Centre: Resources 2014) – are directed to, and used by, government policy makers and other points of social influence and action.

While spirituality and ageing has been discussed in a largely positive light in terms of the benefits it can render the older person, not all researchers are unambiguously positive in their observations. For example, while the study by Lawrence and his co-researchers (Lawrence et al. 2006) recognised that spiritual dimensions may be useful to mental health
patients, they also noted that psychiatrists were less clear as to how spiritual advisors might actually work in the health care team. Another research team, Barak and Achiron (1998), directly interrogate the Bible and Talmud to establish that old age is in fact scripturally associated mainly with illness. A range of physical and sensory impairments is noted, including reduced sexual functioning, blindness, dementia, and apathy. Other researchers in the field of spirituality and psychological development have drawn attention to the problems of seniors becoming involved in spiritual cults which exploit and abuse them financially and emotionally. Women over 50 years of age appear to be particularly at risk (Niestat n.d.). The issue of spirituality and dementia is examined in terms of the problems that individuals with advanced dementia have in even being able to express their spirituality. This is reported in some case studies of dementia and spirituality (Shamy 1993).

Even the Jungian transformational psychology researchers make cautionary observations. Researchers and theorists Grof and Grof coined the term “spiritual emergence” to describe the movement of an individual to a more expanded way of being, with a heightened spiritual awareness as a key part of the emergence (Viggiano & Krippner 2010). However, the Grofs also note the danger of “spiritual emergency”:

*It is extremely important to take a balanced approach and to be able to differentiate spiritual emergencies from genuine psychoses. While traditional approaches tend to pathologise mystical states, there is the opposite danger of spiritualizing psychotic states and glorifying pathology, or even worse, overlooking an organic problem (Grof and Grof cited in Barnum 2003, p. 46)*

As previously stated, Jung himself warned against the dangers of “old age” spirituality. “The inner images keep me from getting lost in personal retrospection. Many old people become too involved in the reconstruction of past events. They remain “imprisoned in these memories”(Jung 1967, pp. 351–352). In the medical–therapeutic research literature, therefore, the spiritual experiences associated with ageing appear to reveal the potential for an ongoing enriched life and death. However, what is not presented is a simple equation between spirituality and wellbeing. There is the potential for personal regression when working with the individual’s spiritual nature.

**2.4.2.3 Other social science research**

Other social science research interests associated with ageing and spirituality covers area such as: demographic profiles of age and religion/spirituality, role of organised religion with...
regard to the aged, impact of culture on ageing and spirituality, and baby boomers and their spiritual needs – the New Age spirituality.

Demographic profiles of age and religion/spirituality

Typical of this sociological research focus are studies that seek to identify religious/spiritual engagement by various cohorts defined by age or geographic location, for example. A range of studies point to the effect of increased “religiosity” which occurs as a cohort’s age increases (Deaton, 2009). Another set of demographic studies point to the greater longevity of women as opposed to men (Kimble 1985) and draw implications for social policy and programs. Harrington provides an Australian perspective on the demography of age and its implications for spirituality in her study “Spiritual wellbeing for older people” (Harrington 2010, pp. 179–194) where again religious/spiritual engagement by various cohorts such as age and geographic location were identified.

The role of organised religion with regard to the aged

The readiness of the clergy for their role of ministry to the aged has been placed on the table for discussion by studies such as that conducted by Norris et al. (2004). On the basis of a community-based study, the researchers concluded that there was an important discrepancy between the spiritual end-of-life ministry role taken up by clergy and their training to fulfil this role. Those who train our clergy are also discussed in terms of the role expected of churches to commit to the physical as well as the spiritual care of the elderly. Reports from both UK researchers (Howse 1999; The Leveson Centre: Resources 2014) and American research teams (American Society on Aging 2014) outline the increased caring load which will fall to the churches as the ageing baby boomers prepare to enter care arrangements. The baby boomer demographic is once more the focus of scholarly concern. On the local Australian level a review of the past decade reveals the rapid growth in aged care commitments of church-based organisations such as Blue Care (Uniting Church), Anglicare (Anglican), Baptist Care (Baptist) and Ozcare (Catholic).

The impact of culture on ageing and spirituality

One of the most discussed issues in terms of ageing and culture (and ethnicity) is that of death and bereavement. Australian reports, for example, describe the range of approaches required to address the spiritual needs and traditions of the rich ethnic mix of our contemporary community (Health Department of WA 1996). Reports from the United States similarly focus on the needs of Native Americans and of African Americans (Redd 2011).
Apart from differing spiritual needs in palliative contexts, the issue of ageing, spirituality and culture also impacts on the treatment of elders by different ethnic groups. This includes the notion of filial piety in Asian ethnic groups (Sung 1998; Croft 2010, 2012, 2013). However, a cautionary note is struck by Dalby in his review of studies associated with the increase in gerotranscendence with age. While he found it generally likely that there was a relationship between age, spirituality and gerotranscendent experiences, he could not find conclusive evidence that gerotranscendence was present in all cultures (Dalby 2006).

**Baby boomers and their spiritual needs – New Age spirituality**

As part of their “culture”, the baby boomers have a strong interest in a range of spiritualties (Drury 2004; McColl 1989). Baby boomers have an established record for experimentation with transcendent vehicles, whether it is LSD or Tibetan Buddhism (McColl 1989). As a sociological phenomenon, this is now being reflected in nursing and medical paradigms (Barnum 2003, pp. 141–142). New Age spirituality is part of the raw material of our culture’s awakening to issues of spirituality and ageing and it provides a range of self-help approaches (Jewell 2003; Dwoskin n.d.). It also provides a wealth of personal ageing reflections and meditations (Morrison 1998; Smith 1990; Bien 2003).

Another aspect of the New Age spirituality of the baby boomers is found in a quiet, possibly at times discredited, corner of research activity. It seeks to document some of the spiritual phenomena associated with death and dying, many of which are theorised as outcomes of the intense transpersonal forces experienced at this time (Singh 1998). Some of the phenomenological events such as near death experiences, palliative carer/nurse narratives, and mystical experiences receive serious treatment by respected authors and practitioners (Singh 1998; Barnum 2003). They are included here as part of the current field discussion because some part of the legitimate research community incorporates such phenomenological events into their thinking and models concerning ageing and spirituality. Such events are also evident in the Scriptures and in the narratives that have been collected as part of this current research.

**2.4.3 Theological scholarship**

The theological and Biblical perspectives on ageing and spirituality appear to move in parallel to those of the scientific community in that the major focus of effort is on practical aged ministry. A practical Christian response is evident in the literature associated with: (i) pastoral care approaches for supporting older adults in the church community; (ii) the role of
women in contributing to spirituality for aged individuals; (iii) the transformative experience of individuals working with older/dying individuals; and (iv) spirituality and ageing in the Australian context.

*Pastoral care approaches for supporting older adults in the Church community:* There is a range of approaches in the provision of pastoral care for older persons. Again, such range and flexibility is entirely consistent with the quality of care literature discussed earlier, where older persons expected that their churches would support both their physical and spiritual needs in a flexible fashion. Support approaches include capturing personal narratives about an older individual's life and significant events (Kimble 1989, p. 163); various ministry course curricula (*Luther Seminary Course Catalogue* 2014); Hooker’s work on collecting older individuals’ narratives (cited in *The Center for the Humanities* 2006). Narrative work in specialist aged settings is also supported in the literature, including narrative work involving individuals with dementia (MacKinlay 2006b; Jewell 2011) and narrative work with patients in palliative care. In the palliative care context, the creation of life affirming narratives has been studied in terms of positive dying (Nakashima & Canda 2005) and supported as a strategy. Another common approach involves recognising the vulnerability of older persons and engaging in a ministry of consolation, with prayers, sermons and work groups directed at the frail elderly. A similar pastoral approach is found in the ministry of care provided to individuals in aged care homes.

*The role of women in contributing to spirituality for aged individuals:* as part of acknowledging the data from demographic studies, some commentators have sought to address the fact that there will be numerically more aged women than aged men in the older population (Kimble 1985). Spirituality that references older women is identified and rituals such as croning ceremonies and blessing rituals are described as individually and communally useful (Grudzen 2006).

*The transformative experience of individuals working with older/dying individuals:* those who work closely with the elderly sometimes report that it is they who are transformed by the caring role. This potential of the ageing person for those in relationship with them sometimes in terms of observing the older person’s inner spiritual growth is one commonly documented aspect of spirituality and ageing (Jenkins 2003, p. 197).
**Spirituality and ageing in the Australian context:** Australian researchers have made significant contributions to the discussions around ageing and spirituality. The work of MacKinlay (2004, 2006, 2010, 2012) in particular, has been important to contemporary thinking in Australia on age and spirituality issues. MacKinlay’s studies on palliative care and dementia have received public and community recognition. She has contributed to the debate about public policy on the care of older Australians and she has raised community awareness through sustained publication, public presentations and teaching.

Australian research interests associated with old age often focus at the provision of aged care. Australia, like most modern Western societies, commits significant resources to this field. The Aged Care Standards and Australian Government funding associated with aged care provision (Croft 2013) have quality requirements associated with addressing the spiritual needs of the older person in receipt of care and support. Analysis of these quality standards as reported by Pringle finds that they present a complex challenge, which cannot be met by “just celebrating important cultural days and organising visiting clergy” (Pringle 2012, p. 242).

### 2.4.4 Critique of literature relevant to Research Question 3

Research Question 3 for this study of spirituality and ageing asks:

> Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

In this overview of the relevant disciplinary scholarship associated with spirituality and aging it is argued that:

1. The research interests around ageing and spirituality are wide ranging.
2. The focus of research is broadly on the practical application of spirituality in the context of health care, palliative care, aged care and pastoral work.
3. Both social science and theological scholarship use spirituality in an everyday manner – frequently conflating faith, religion and spirituality (cf. Kaldor, Hughes and
Black 2010). However, the work of Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010) referenced a wide range of variables in their study of spirituality and wellbeing. In doing so, they captured the extensive nature of the research field’s interest in spirituality.

4. There is no evidence of an examination of spirituality as a phenomenon in the context of the experiences of older contemporary Australians – outside of interview or case study material collected in the research context of care (cf. MacKInlay 2004; Jewell 1999).

5. There is no extended primary data reported or provided around spirituality as a phenomenon in the context of the experiences of older contemporary Australians.

6. Theological scholarship around spirituality and ageing appears to reflect a practical everyday approach to spirituality and ageing that is broadly reflective of Schneiders’ anthropological approach. However, it does not specifically reference the strong conceptual base that Schneiders and her colleagues are providing in their studies on spirituality. The uptake of Schneiders’ broad anthropologic approach to spirituality which is being employed to re-contextualise spirituality in terms of Catholic education for young people (Sharkey 2010) could well be considered in approaches for engaging with the older individual.

As a result of this survey of scholarly literature around the ways in which spirituality in the context of old age is discussed, a number of points of reliance for this study, as well as a significant gaps, have emerged. The issues from the scholarship which I will rely on are: (i) spirituality in the context of old age needs to be discussed in a broad framework – both from a social science and a theological point of view; and (ii) spirituality in the context of old age needs to be discussed in terms of the real life or everyday experiences of older contemporary individuals.

The gaps in the scholarship for Research Question 3 can be described as:

- There is no primary data reported or provided without researcher interpolations around spirituality as a phenomenon experienced by contemporary older Australians.
There is no consensus or suggested consensus framework for discussing spirituality across disciplines.
Although re-contextualisation studies have considered spirituality in terms of discrete groups (e.g. social workers) there is no re-contextualisation research around spirituality in the context of older individuals in contemporary Australian society.

2.5 Locating the research questions in the applicable literature

In this chapter, I have placed each specific research question in the context of the relevant scholarship. This process has resulted in an overall research profile for the present study in terms of (i) areas of scholarship upon which I will rely; and (ii) gaps in the research field which this study will address, and in doing so make an important contribution to the field of spirituality and ageing.

Those areas of scholarship upon which I will rely are:

For Research Question 1:

1. MacKinlay and other researchers’ emphasis on the importance of reporting the authentic “voice” and lived experiences of older individuals. In MacKinlay’s case, it is most importantly the voices and experiences of contemporary older Australians.

2. MacKinlay’s provision of thematic spiritual material associated with contemporary older Australians.

For Research Question 2, the following identified Scriptural themes:

1. The centrality of the unmediated God relationship as central to human spirituality.

2. The centrality of establishing an appropriate relationship with the Feminine in the Divinity.


For Research Question 3, the following conceptual arguments around spirituality:
1. Spirituality in the context of old age needs to be discussed in a broad framework – both from a social science and a theological point of view.

2. Spirituality in the context of old age needs to be discussed in terms of the real life or everyday experiences of older contemporary individuals.

Similarly, the gaps in the research field that this study will address are:

For Research Question 1:

1. Generally, there is a lack of research around the phenomenology of the spiritual experiences of older individuals – let alone older individuals in contemporary Australian society. The scholarly narrative material associated with older individuals in terms of spirituality is overwhelmingly contextualised in terms of health, social work, wellbeing and care issues. The focus is not on the content or dynamics of the individual’s spirituality but rather on the way spirituality as a vaguely described variable interacts with a range of social science and health interests. MacKinlay’s body of work is an important exception here.

2. The format of the narrative gerontology material as found in the scholarly material is rarely in a narrative configuration. This can mean a loss of “voice” and a potential loss of emphasis and meaning.

3. The analysis of spiritual narratives of older individuals provides limited thematic information. Where a literary critical approach to narrative gerontology is evident, the arguments are theoretical rather than evidence based.

4. There are no spiritual narratives voiced by contemporary older Australians pertaining to their spiritual experiences.

5. There are no spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australian individuals, which have been collected without any pre-shaping and analysed for their thematic content associated with spiritual experiences according to an appropriate qualitative methodology.

6. There is no Australian study that uses a cohort of older Australian individuals to re-contextualise the concept of “spirituality” for contemporary use through the identification and analysis of their spiritual experiences and narratives.

7. There is no data set of spiritual narratives in a narrative format, which evidence the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians.
For Research Question 2:

1. There is general under-representation of hermeneutical studies employing a literary critical lens in research associated with theology.
2. There is under-representation of literary critical studies of the Bible considering the symbolic and thematic value of actions by older individuals, of studies considering the symbolic value of the role and actions of older females; and of studies considering the symbolic value of narrative episodes which confront the reader with moral dilemmas and uncertainties.

For Research Question 3:

1. There is no primary data reported or provided without researcher interpolations around spirituality as a phenomenon experienced by contemporary older Australians.
2. There is no consensus or suggested consensus framework for discussing spirituality across disciplines.
3. Although there are re-contextualisation studies that have considered spirituality in terms of discrete groups (e.g. social workers), there is however, no re-contextualisation research around spirituality in the context of older individuals in contemporary Australian society.

Implications for research design and methodologies
The gaps in the research literature which have been identified in terms of the three research questions have to be addressed through the use of an appropriate research design and appropriate methodologies. This aspect of the study is addressed in the following chapter – Chapter 3: Methodologies.

2.6 The role of internet sources, pastoral material and other non-scholarly sources in the study

The final section of the literature review associated with each of the research questions addresses the issue of the inclusion of non-scholarly internet and other “non-scholarly” material in the study. As a matter of reasonably verifiable fact (i.e. refer to the References
section of this thesis), this study has developed its arguments from a base of information and scholarly material which can be configured along the lines of 85% peer-reviewed and 15% non-scholarly material. The weighting of reviewed literature is appropriately and overwhelming in favour of peer-reviewed scholarship. Nonetheless, the inclusion of any level of non-scholarly material requires clarification.

The relatively small amount of non-scholarly material covers the following areas:

- non-scholarly internet material relating to internet sermons
- non-scholarly internet material relating to pastoral projects
- non-scholarly internet links to university courses on religion/theology
- non-scholarly internet websites with (usually) anonymous opinion pieces
- non-scholarly internet self-help medical articles
- non-scholarly newspaper articles
- popular press books, personal reminiscing
- proceedings of conferences and workshops
- non–peer-reviewed facts sites – encyclopaedias, maps, dictionaries.

Firstly, there is a wide spread of types of non-scholarly material. This effectively means that at no time does the study rely on non-scholarly material to argue or establish a major issue. The only occasion where this reliance on non-scholarly work may become important is in the discussion around Phanuel in the Anna narrative. In this discussion, I reference both Bauckham’s research (1997) and that of the anonymous author “Churchmouse Campanologist” (n.d.) to argue for an important connection between Anna and Phanuel. The argument could stand with only a reference to the distinguished academic Richard Bauckham, but it would also be a case of academic dishonesty to fail to acknowledge an insight (which is probably more significant than that of Bauckham’s), regardless of its origin. I have chosen to acknowledge the non-scholarly insight.

Secondly, internet material relating to sermons and pastoral commentary provides an important contact point for individuals and their faith or spiritual communities. This study aims to examine the lived experience of older individuals, which includes how they are contextualised within their communities. All materials relating to these relationships have insights to offer here; and important information might well be lost if there is a pre-shaping of material to only include that sourced in academic scholarship. This study’s broad
definition of spirituality may well apply in this discussion around scholarly and non-scholarly material in that the study of spirituality in its full diversity is not a discussion reserved for the authors of peer-reviewed material. It is also a study of unique everyday human experiences, in which everyone is entitled to a voice.

Thirdly, the issue of “voice”: while it is a set of material which I have identified but upon which I do not largely rely, popular press and personal reminiscence works (either published or internet based) do offer a “voice” for the older individual and their spirituality. Some of the authors of this material (Dawkins 2006; Benson 1997) are recognised scholars who are seeking to gain wide community attention for their points of view. Limiting material to just that found in peer-reviewed scholarship loses important contemporary voices around our understanding of spirituality in Western culture and societies.

Finally, newspaper articles, conference proceedings, workshops and university course outlines assist in establishing the everyday currency of contextual issues associated with contemporary spirituality and ageing. My use of such material in this study is illustrative rather than evidentiary.

2.7 Summary

In Chapter 2 I have identified and critiqued scholarly and other contemporary literature that applies to the study’s aim and research problem. The literature review was organized to provide guidance for each of the research questions in terms of scholarship which could be relied upon for the study; and in terms of gaps in the literature which the research would need to address. The key findings of the literature review were: there were no narrated experiences of older contemporary Australians in a complete narrative format; there were no re-contextualization studies which involved the narrated spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians; there were few literary critical studies which employed a narrative literary critical approach to the symbolic and thematic value of older protagonists and their actions in the Bible; the primary research interests around ageing and spirituality were on the practical application of spirituality in the context of health care, palliative care, aged care and pastoral work; and there was no consensus or suggested consensus framework for discussing spirituality across disciplines. The dissertation’s research will be located within gaps and emerging problems as identified in the literature review. Chapter 2 also provided the rationale for using limited non-peer reviewed resources including internet material.
3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

It was argued in Chapter 2 that the literature on ageing and spirituality reported research with regard to health, social science and theological interests. Research showed that issues of old age associated with physical and psychological wellbeing, personal relevance, relationships, care, and death stand relationally in varying degrees to the older person’s spirituality. In a similar way, it was argued in Chapter 2 that Biblical scholarship concerning old age largely focuses on the characteristics of old age, and in particular how the Scriptures work with the juxtaposition of old age as wisdom and old age as frailty.

However, what remains largely unexplored in the current research literature is:

1. empirical studies, particularly qualitative studies, on the spiritual experiences of older Australians
2. thematic analyses of Biblical narratives concerning older individuals
3. comparative studies of contemporary spirituality and Biblical spirituality
4. empirical studies on the articulated relationship between the accounts of spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians and disciplinary knowledge associated with spirituality

It is this gap in the research literature which this present study seeks to address and which has determined the three specific research questions for this study.

The aim of this chapter is to argue for a research design and methods that provide: (i) a data set or collection of spiritual narratives provided by contemporary older Australians (ii) a thematic inductive analysis of the spiritual narratives; (iii) a critical analysis of key Biblical narratives in which old age carries a symbolic value in order to identify their thematic elements; and (iv) a framework for the comparative analysis of both contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives in terms of contemporary scholarship on spirituality.
3.1.1. **A qualitative research design employing a multi-method approach**

A qualitative research design employing a multi-method approach together with the development of a conceptual Framework of Spirituality for comparison purposes is argued to be appropriate for this study. The proposed research design involves a narrative methodology for the contemporary spiritual stories; and a critical methodology for the Biblical spiritual stories. Moreover the research design includes the conceptual development of an integrated Framework of Spirituality which will facilitate the comparison/re-contextualization analysis around contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives. This is consistent with a number of approaches to the study of spirituality identified in the research literature (Klose 2012; Mullins 1997, MacKinlay 2004).

3.1.2 **A bricolage research design**

It is also argued that the qualitative research design proposed for the study can be further conceptualised as a bricolage research design. Denzin and Lincoln developed bricolage research to “examine phenomena from multiple, and sometimes competing theoretical and methodological perspectives” (Rogers 2012, p.1). The extension to, and designation of, this study as bricolage research is argued as appropriate in order to allow for the complexity of contexts, interpretive positions and perspectives, and conceptual constructs which are associated with the study. This study has to embrace “flexibility and plurality by amalgamating multiple disciplines” (here, selected social sciences, theology, and humanities); “multiple methodologies” (here, interpretive interactionism, and the critical methodology of literary criticism); and varying theoretical perspectives (here, Jungian and Feminist) (Denzin & Lincoln 1999, pp 17-18).

Kress (2011) observes that bricolage is “newly recognized as its own unique research genre” (p. 103). She identifies that one of the key distinguishing features of a bricolage research design is its use – not only of various research methods – but also of “various academic disciplines in order to continually shift ... analytical lenses and deepen the sophistication of ... understanding the research object” (p.103). Kress' identification of bricolage research design as appropriate for use in inter-disciplinary research supports bricolage research design in my study where selected social science scholarship intersects with literary criticism from the humanities and with theological scholarship on Scriptural studies and spirituality as an academic discipline. A bricolage research design is appropriate for the complex contextual architecture of my research; and its use in an interdisciplinary way serves to “remedy the limitations of monolithic views of the world and their corresponding discursive structures,
which necessarily constrain one’s ability to make sense of the world.” (p.103). My study acknowledges that the use of bricolage research designs is an emerging area of qualitative research: and this is again reinforced in Kuhl’s 2014 research which employs a critical narrative research bricolage for insights into dyscalculia (2014). Kuhl draws attention to the use of bricolage in the study of phenomena requiring “multiple lenses” (p.10) for analysis and interpretation. However, she references Kincheloe’s warning (2001) as to the “resistance within academia” (p.2001) with which bricolage is sometimes met. This it is argued “has to do, not only with epistemological differences in how to approach research, but also with differing stances toward interdisciplinary research” (p.10). Nevertheless the argument for the use of a bricolage research design for this study is promoted - based as it is upon the interdisciplinary nature of its investigation of the narrated spiritual experiences of older Australians and how their accounts articulate with Biblical and disciplinary understanding of spirituality.

**Theological studies and research methodologies**

Researchers undertaking theological studies generally place their efforts within the search for enhanced discernment or revelation (Senior 2010). This observation would generally apply, for example, to the scriptural studies undertaken by scholars who reference spirituality as an academic discipline (e.g. Green 2013b; Coloe 2006b) or more particularly, those scholars who define spirituality narrowly (e.g. Lee 2012, pp. 9–10). The use of quantitative methodologies in theological research is limited by the view that these methodologies are generally positivistic and largely unsympathetic in terms of theological undertakings. However, it is the case that contemporary theological effort does use qualitative research methods typically employed within social sciences research (Francis, Robbins & Astley 2009; Swinton & Mowat 2006). Qualitative approaches have been legitimised and are established within the field of theological research. With this observation in view then, the present study will rely on such research, arguing to employ a qualitative methodology in the context of research which is in part theologically framed.

**The use of multi-method approaches in research designs for spirituality and religion**

In my analyses of the definitional research associated with spirituality and of the scholarship associated with this study’s research questions, I have identified a body of research that employs multi-methodology (qualitative and critical methodology) research designs as distinct from mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative) designs. I will provide
examples of these studies in the following discussion. My purpose in doing this here is not to rely on the outcomes of the research in this context but rather to illustrate the application and extent of multi-method approaches in research around spirituality and spirituality and ageing. This study’s further extension of the use of multi method designs into a bricolage research design has only limited supporting examples in the literature. The primary reason for this is the previously discussed emerging use of bricolage in qualitative research.

Scholarship associated with doctoral studies which had a research focus on spirituality or religion and which employed multi-methodology designs incorporating a wide range of methods included:

1. Anne Klose’s 2013 study ‘Joint and covenantal priesthood as a narrative of community for Australian Baptist Churches’, where she employs a multi-methodology design incorporating historical analysis, documentation analysis and Biblical narrative analysis to examine the complexities of the community and the individual’s relationship within the Australian Baptist congregation

2. Kerry Gemmell’s 2012 study ‘Experiences of ovarian cancer in older women’ employed a qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis in conjunction with the theoretical framework developed by Roux et al. (2002) identified as “the model of inner strength”. The study sought through narrative study to better understand how older women with a diagnosis of ovarian cancer construct meaning for their lives including their approach to spirituality

3. Jennifer Broadbent’s 2012 study ‘Spirituality of young people with cancer: an exploratory study’, where she uses a qualitative phenomenological approach with both structured and free narrative interviews

4. Peter Ivers’ 2010 study ‘From the cathedral to the classroom: The emergence of new discourses on religious education’, where he employs a research design with a multi-methods mix which includes fine grain textual analysis of policy documents, critical discourse analysis, and application of genre chains

5. Janice Grajczonek’s 2006 study “Wot’s in a string o words?” An ethnomethodological study investigating the approach to, and construction of, the
classroom religious program in the Catholic pre-school’, where she employs ethnomethodological and functional linguistic methodologies and notes that “drawing on two or more compatible perspectives within qualitative research can be mutually informative” (2006, p.33)

6. Christopher Schmidt’s 2005 study ‘Being, becoming and belonging: The phenomenological essence of spiritual leisure experiences’, where he employs a broadly interpreted phenomenological approach and supports this approach by referencing Van Manen (1997 p. 7): “making something of a text or of lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery, or disclosure … understanding is not a rule bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning”. Schmidt employs a mix of methods including journaling, in-depth interviews, written reflections, composite descriptions of phenomena involving Epoche, phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation

7. Upolu Luma Vaai’s 2006 study ‘A theological reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Trinity from a Samoan perspective’, where she employs doctrinal analysis of the Trinity and Samoan cultural/religious studies. The outcome is effectively a re-contextualisation of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Samoan cultural terms

8. Robert Webster’s 2003 study ‘An existential Framework of Spirituality for education’, where he employs a multi-methods approach through the use of document analysis of educational writings on spiritual education together with a re-contextualisation of spirituality in terms of existential concepts. This data is then used to construct a Framework of Spirituality for religious education

Peer-reviewed articles and scholarly publications also provide examples where a research focus on spirituality or religion employed a multi-methods research approach.

1. Black (2013) employs a multi-methods design, including structured interviews and a case study to research gender, religion and the experience of suffering

2. Unantenne et al. (2013) employ a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and participant observation to research the role of spirituality and faith in individuals with chronic diseases

3. Williamson & Hood (2013) use a research design that includes phenomenological interviews and hermeneutic interpretation of the resulting data presented as rich text to study recovering substance abusers

4. MacKinlay (2004) actually employs a mixed-methodological approach, including survey data to pre-shape subsequent interview questions; and in-depth qualitative interviews and thematic analyses to investigate the spirituality of older individual Australians. However, she notes the weakness of the quantitative survey data to add value. Instead, she moves to rely upon the data established through the in-depth interviews which formed the qualitative arm of her methodological design (MacKinlay 2004, pp. 40–41)

5. Mankowski & Rappaport (2000) employ a complex multi-method narrative design to investigate the relationship between social processes and individual experiences in spiritually based communities. They report the use of the following methods for collecting narrative data: direct and participant observation; focus groups; interviews; field notes; group generated documents and other communication instruments.

It is argued therefore that the choice of a qualitative research design with a multi-method approach is appropriate in that: (i) multi-method qualitative research designs have currency and credibility in higher degree and peer-reviewed research associated with spirituality and religion; (ii) multi-method research designs incorporating Biblical analyses have currency and credibility in higher degree and peer-reviewed research associated with spirituality and religion (e.g. Klose 2013) and (iii) multi-method research designs incorporating conceptual
framework constructs for analysis purposes (e.g. Gemmel 2010; Webster 2003) have currency and credibility in higher degree and peer-reviewed research associated with spirituality and religion.

The extension of a multi-method qualitative design to a bricolage research approach is argued on the basis that the phenomenon under investigation – spirituality – is a multi-faceted phenomenon. Spirituality – as understood from sociological, psychological, literary, theological and Biblical perspectives – is multi-dimensional and multi-contextual. This understanding is fundamental to the present study. I agree with Grajczonek’s claim that “two or more compatible perspectives within qualitative research can be mutually informative” (2006, p. 33); and with Williamson & Hood’s (2013 p. 892) claim that “hermeneutical interpretation is inherent to the phenomenological approach”, including the data produced by phenomenological in-depth interviews; and finally I agree with Miller and Fox when they argue that “two or more analytic formations may be linked and made mutually informative, while also respecting the distinctive contributions and integrity of each perspective” (2004, p. 35). The methodologies which are identified later in this chapter offer appropriate ways to collect and analyse data on contemporary and Biblical spirituality, while yet also capturing the multiple perspectives associated with spirituality as a phenomenon.

3.1.3 Limitations of this study’s bricolage and qualitative research design

The apparent limitations of qualitative research generally are well represented in the literature (e.g. Hunter 2010, p. 44). These include difficulties around replication and generalisability, which are, for example, crucial to quantitative research designs. However, the choice of a qualitative methodology focuses the research on open outcomes and in-depth understandings of “lived” experiences rather than hypotheses to be proved or disproved. Nevertheless, the study does mirror the limitations of qualitative research in that:

1. a small sample size is involved in the study
2. selection of participants was effected largely through snowballing and participant self-selection
3. selection of Biblical spiritual narratives was made on a discretionary basis by the researcher
4. the position of the researcher both in the interpretive interactionism research and in the literary critical analysis of the Scriptures is subjectively configured
5. the interdisciplinary perspectives provided by a bricolage research approach may result in superficial research outcomes if the contributing disciplinary knowledge sets lack depth.

Such limitations in terms of the overall research design find mitigation (i) for the contemporary spiritual narratives in the strategies around trustworthiness developed by qualitative researchers; and (ii) for the Biblical narratives in the focus on in-text evidence of the narrative literary critical method.

3.1.4 Location of the researcher in the research

My study seeks to clarify where the researcher is located in this research. It is argued that by virtue of the chosen research methodologies and best practice as evidenced in the body of peer reviewed scholarship accessed for this study, the interpretive posture assumed by the researcher should be evident throughout the study. But I am conscious of the fact that others come to research such as this study with a different perspective and seek an uninterrupted view of information, analysis and argument. The following discussion seeks to find a way through this dilemma.

How personal and where?

The methodologies selected for this study are (i) a critical methodology of literary criticism for the Scriptural analyses and (ii) a qualitative methodology in terms of Denzin’s interpretive interactionism (Denzin 1989) for identifying and analysing the contemporary spiritual narratives of older individuals. It is clear that for both methodologies as expressed in their theoretical-conceptual underpinnings and their application in published research, the role and location of the researcher is both expected and required to be evident. From the perspective of broader social science research (for example, research associated with education (Williams 1994); mental health (Aird 2007); or psychology (Gemmell 2012) this requirement for personal insertion of the researcher held true. As Gemmell argued in her reflexive statement – reflexivity “necessitates an awareness of the researcher’s involvement in the construction of meaning during the research process, and an acknowledgement of the impossibility of remaining ‘outside of’ one’s subject matter while conducting research” (Gemmell, 2012, p.7).
Location of the researcher:

The critical methodology of literary criticism and practice evident in peer reviewed scholarship

This study has previously identified a body of scholarship which employed a hermeneutic or critical methodology of literary criticism when analysing and interpreting Scripture. This was discussed in the earlier argument about Biblical spirituality; and it is further discussed in the following section on Schneiders’ hermeneutics. As indicated in this argument, many respected scholars introduced personal information and reflection into their otherwise forensic reading of textual material. I refer here for example to Green (2013b) and Coloe (2006). Philosophically and methodologically this is consistent with a hermeneutic which accepts that analysis proceeds from a subjective rather than an objective position. Schneiders referenced Ricoeur to have the researcher’s interaction with the research understood methodologically (2011, p. 27).

Location of the researcher:

Qualitative methodologies and interpretive interactionism, and practice evident in peer reviewed scholarship

Qualitative methodologies expend considerable conceptual effort in understanding the presence and importance of the researcher in the research being undertaken. Denzin’s interpretive interactionism (Denzin 1989) is unambiguous with regard to accounting for the researcher in the research and developing methodological strategies to support validity around the role of the researcher.

The location of the researcher in this study

I have decided to address the problem of meeting methodological requirements and practice as well as accommodating perspectives which find the researcher’s presence distracting in the following ways:

1. In the discussion around narrative and qualitative methodologies in this chapter I outline why qualitative methodologies required clarity around the researcher and their role in the research; and how in particular this is important for interpretive interactionism from the position of trustworthiness of research findings. However, the personal journaling which forms part of this methodology’s validation strategy will be located in a Personal Reflection Appendix B rather than being inserted into the main body of the dissertation’s argument. Moreover the reflections of
methodology and theory will be undertaken in the concluding sections of the
Findings Chapter.

2. Similarly, the personal background to the literary critical analysis of the Biblical
narratives will be incorporated into the personal journaling segment of the study.
This again will be located in the Personal Reflection Appendix B.

I argue that this response to concerns around the insertion of the researcher into the study
allows both an untrammelled perspective on the analyses and the qualitative methodological
considerations to be met.

3.1.5 Research ethics

The narratives and personal commentary sought from, and provided by, the older
Australians in this study were treated within the ethical standards required by Griffith
University. Methodological consideration around ethics was addressed by submission of the
research proposal to the research organisation’s Ethical Clearance Committee. For the
present study this was Griffith University’s Ethical Clearance Committee. All organisations
and individuals approached in relation to this study were provided with advice around
Griffith University’s commitment to the ethical conduct of research carried out under its
auspices. The formal statement to this effect was provided as follows.

"The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on
Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about
the ethical conduct of the research project you should contact the Manager,
Research Ethics on 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffth.edu.au. [Ref. No.
OTH/15/13/HREC]"

After meeting the ethical protocols for the study as determined by the Ethical Clearance
Committee the research was approved to undertake the data collection phase for the
interpretive interaction qualitative study.
Ethical conduct of the qualitative research in terms of research ownership

All research associated with this study has been undertaken by the author of the thesis. Griffith University’s wording of the Ethical Conduct documentation requires that the lead researcher for the study is identified as the Principal Supervisor. Nonetheless, the research and this dissertation are solely attributable to the candidate and copyright is held by the candidate.

3.2 Section 1: A methodology appropriate for Research Question 1

3.2.1 The spiritual narratives of older individuals – a qualitative methodology

Within the research design argued for this present study, a qualitative approach has been chosen as appropriate for the collection and thematic analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives. This choice is made because a qualitative methodology supports the researcher: to participate, observe, discuss, interview and continually pursue emerging issues; to be open and flexible rather than limiting and delineating with issues; and to exploit the richness of a research context when studying broad, complex concepts (Patton 1990, pp.39-40). It is the research approach which best addresses this study’s focus on the complex phenomenon of spirituality and so facilitates responding to Research Question 1:

What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

However, as indicated in the range of qualitative methodologies reported in the peer-reviewed scholarship and outlined in seminal qualitative research handbooks (e.g. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) a further set of considerations must be addressed before the final selection of a methodology is made. These considerations, associated with the identification, collection and analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives within a qualitative narrative methodology, are as follows.

The chosen qualitative methodology will validly capture the spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians:

- as an individual experience or set of experiences
- as narrative and in extended narrative format
- without any pre-shaping of the narrative data
• with a focus on rich text or “thick” description
• with a focus on individual perspectives and emotions
• with a focus on “epiphany” events.

The chosen qualitative methodology will also:

• require the researcher to incorporate a personal introspective position within the research
• identify processes for managing and analysing narratives into themes
• establish the relationship between the phenomenon as revealed through individual narrative and the social construct which seeks to address it.

These considerations shade across both narrative and phenomenological research methodologies (Cresswel 2007, pp. 78–80). As a result of this circumstance, a qualitative research methodology that is both narrative and phenomenological in orientation has been identified. This identified methodology is Denzin’s interpretive interactionism.

**Interpretive interactionism – focusing on the individual’s experiences of phenomena**

Interpretive interactionism is a qualitative research methodology developed by Norman Denzin\(^5\) and other researchers, which collects the narratives of individuals around a phenomenon. Its focus is on revealing in as richly detailed manner as possible the perspective, attitudes and emotions of the individual experiencing a phenomenon and in then interrogating the society’s response to the phenomenon. In its strictest and initial formulation Denzin (Denzin 1989; Denzin & Lincoln 2000) argue that the approach should only be used “when the researcher wants to examine the relationship between personal troubles, for example wife battering ... and the public policies ... to address those problems” (Denzin 1989, p. 10). However, in the evolving uses to which his methodology has been employed and implicit even within his own initial work, the boundaries of Denzin’s interpretive interactionism have been extended over the past decades. The uptake of Denzin’s work in the health and nursing fields provides an example of the extension of his

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\(^5\)This study is considerably indebted to Dr Eric Williams who suggested that this methodology may be appropriate for the research question. See Eric Williams 1994, ‘Women’s experiences of social support as adult learners in an Australian community college’, PhD dissertation, Urbana, Illinois.

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Denzin’s work has been used and extended by social science researchers; and the theological research field has also benefited from his qualitative approach. His work for instance is referenced in the post-graduate schools and programs of Departments and Schools of Theology where interpretive interactionism is used for field based research (Hamilton 2004). Theological reflection is also argued to benefit from the research approaches sympathetic to Denzin’s work (Wild 2003). Theological scholarship and Denzin’s work also share an important overlap in concept and language around the term “epiphany”. Denzin chose to use the term “epiphany” to describe those “interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives ... which have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person” (Denzin 1989: 15). Denzin in his seminal work on interpretive interactionism provided Martin Luther King’s vision in the kitchen as an example of an epiphany and interactional moment and used it to illustrate this aspect of his methodology (Denzin 1989, p. 15). The research in this study centres on the narratives of older individuals recounting their spiritual experiences – many of which have such an “epiphany” or transformational aspect to them.

**Conceptions of ontology and epistemology underpinning interpretive interactionism**

Interpretive interactionism as a research methodology or approach is underpinned by an ontological and epistemological paradigm. This paradigm views reality as a construct that is interpreted and experienced by individuals as they interact with each other and with wider social systems (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This is the ontological basis of interpretive interactionism; and it argues for a research purpose that seeks to describe and interpret phenomena rather than generalize findings about it to a wider population. Epistemology is usually understood to mean “how we know the world” (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p.185) and interpretive interactionism employs a critical epistemology which recognises that the researcher’s values and selection of research enquiry will influence research. Findings in this research approach are mediated by the researcher’s values and personal experiences and how the researcher interacts with the object of research and the participants in the research. In my study therefore what can be known about the spirituality of older contemporary Australians is dependent upon my interaction with the participants who share their spiritual narratives. The methodology of interpretive interactionism works within the ontological and
epistemological paradigms and uses a set of data collection and analysis methods to support trustworthiness of the research findings. Such data collection and analysis methods are discussed in the following section.

3.2.2 Data collection

Data collection and the methodology of interpretive interactionism

Denzin argued that interpretive interactionism was based on direct capture of data in the field. This primarily involved interviewing participants, being involved as the researcher to a lesser or greater degree with the data capture, observing the participants in settings which reflect the participants’ lived experiences and - through iterative processes - employing introspection which further enriches the data collected. The resultant data should capture the “voices” of the participants and result in “multi-voiced, polyphonic texts which include the researchers’ experiences” (Plummer 2001, p.13 referencing Denzin 1992, 1997, Chase 2005).

The view of interpretive interactionism which Denzin presents in this argument accounts both for its selection as an appropriate methodology for this research and for the rationale for the selection of methods employed for data collection. In this study the methods used for data collection and the reasons for their choice are:

1. An interview approach with a small sample to generate narratives: this supported data collection in the context of the everyday settings which reflect the participants’ lived experiences. It also supports participant observation which facilitates the capture of participant “voice”.

2. Documentation: the review of applicable literature provides interpretive data on the narrative material captured as part of the bracketing phase. The review of applicable literature occurs after the initial data capture associated with the first interview phase to limit pre-shaping of narrative information.

3.2.3 Selection of participants

Site selection and entry

The selection of sites from which to draw potential participants was an important one in terms of bringing as broad a community representation as possible to the narrative pool. It was decided to approach the following groups because they are typically associated with
older individuals within the Australian community: (i) “Probus” – local groups from the Brisbane metropolitan area; (ii) aged care facilities from the Brisbane metropolitan area; and (iii) community organisations including genealogy interest groups, bowls clubs, over 65’s groups. The directors of a number of these groups were contacted for a meeting at which the proposed research was outlined. A request was then made to make a small presentation at one of their meetings with the aim of encouraging individuals to offer as participants in the research. A 15 minute presentation or small group discussion was provided at each of the selected meetings during which the research questions and associated issues were outlined. At these meetings with groups and with individuals the broad definition of spirituality with which this research worked was stressed. The discussions which followed any meeting attempted to clarify issues and concerns raised by individuals. At these meetings potential participants were advised that they would need to meet at least twice preferably three times with the researcher.

Selection of participants

Participants for the contemporary spiritual narratives part of the study identified themselves as spiritual narrators as a result of attending a meeting or through snowballing – i.e. by word of mouth (cf. MacKInlay 2004, p. 33). In summary the participants presented as:

- volunteers after responding to a presentation at a Probus meeting
- volunteers after responding to presentations at a best practice residential care facility with an active interest in promoting research into aged care
- volunteers on the basis of personal contact with the researcher

From this pool of potential participants, 24 individuals were identified. Selection was based on a mix of participant wellbeing and ease of access to meeting location or home. Since a significant number of those self-selecting as participants were in the 80 years plus age group, some being frail aged, the final number of participants in the narrative collection group was finalised at 17 individuals. Some identified participants were either too frail or ill to undertake extended interviews. The size of the sample comfortably exceeded the minimum sample size recommendations for most common qualitative research designs (Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 51).

General cohort features

The seventeen participants as a cohort displayed the following features. They ranged in age from mid-sixties to one hundred years old: 3 participants are in their late sixties, 4 participants are in their seventies, 4 participants are in their eighties, 5 participants are in
their nineties, and 1 participant turned one hundred years old during the course of the research. Over half the participants (10 participants) were well over eighty years old. Originally there were potentially twenty-four participants: with the additional numbers coming from the residential care facility. Four of the potential additional seven participants were unavailable for undisclosed reasons; and the remaining three potential participants were unable to participate due to health reasons. In fact one of the cohort participants (Participant 11) was unable to complete the full set of interviews due to ongoing problems with her health. The gender split in the group was three males and fourteen females. The educational backgrounds across the group ranged from upper primary schooling to Ph.D. studies and qualifications. The ethnic mix of the group was homogenously Australian of an Anglo-Celtic heritage. The participants were resident within a residential care facility – ten participants; or resident in their own homes – seven participants.

3.2.4 Privacy

All participants took part in the study on the basis that their participation was held to be anonymous. As will be discussed in the analysis of the research data participants generally were sensitive to their spiritual stories leaving them or their family open to embarrassment or even to claims of being “mad”. These stories shared for the purpose of this present research had often been kept entirely private – or shared with only the closest of family members or friends. The question then arose as to why the participants chose to share their stories now? I did put the question to a number of the participants and these were some of the responses:

- The participant thought I was interested and would listen openly.
- The participant knew me and was prepared on the basis of friendship to share these personal stories.
- The participant thought helping with the research was a worthwhile act.
- The participant was unsure as to whether their story was “spiritual” but was interested in telling it to me.
- The participant wanted to put their story on record.

Whatever their reasons either declared or undeclared, the participants told their stories in a way which seemed open and without any undeclared issues I could discern or outline for the purposes of methodological transparency.
3.2.5 Data collection strategies

3.2.5.1 Participant observation

It was argued in the statement about reflexivity earlier in this chapter, that the achievement of methodological objectivity represented a flawed paradigm when collecting data. Indeed qualitative research design and methodologies not only eschewed this objectivity as a goal of research, they actively sought to reflect and explore the complex, paradoxical and emotional aspects of lived human experience. Denzin’s interpretive interactionism allows the researcher to come “closer to real human beings in everyday life” and to “permit as much flexibility into judgments made about the world as possible” (Feagin, Orum & Sjobing 1991, p.23).

Participant observation demands that the involvement of the researcher in the research process needs to be made clear. Spradley (1980) suggested five types of participation on a continuum of involvement: (1) complete, (2) active, (3) moderate, (4) passive, and (5) non-participation. As the researcher I considered my own level of participation in the research to be at the passive-moderate position on the continuum. This position was based on the fact that the participants narrated their stories directly and in an open fashion with essentially no guidance from me. However my insertion into the research became significant at the point of drafting and reflecting on the individual narratives. Participant observation therefore acknowledges that the primary tool for the collection of research data is the researcher themselves (Creswell 2003); that the primary location for the collection of data is in the participants’ field of daily life; and that the primary goal of data collection is to capture the voices of the research participants in polyvocality. Participant observation is suited to research with individuals disclosing highly personal information and in part overcomes any discomfort to which a question-answer technique might give rise.

Over a period of six months I met with the participants associated with this research on up to three occasions. The meetings with the individual participants took place in a location of the participant’s choosing – typically their home or living arrangement within an aged care facility. Some participants however chose to meet me at their volunteer work sites or in coffee shops. The selection of the interview site by the participants supported two important considerations in the collection of data. First, these participant directed circumstances provided me with the opportunity to collect the research data first hand and allowed me establish perspective and rapport around the individual story teller and so assist in the write-up of their narrative. Second, it mitigated the concern articulated by Denzin (2009 p. 135)
where as a result of participant anxiety, the participant may “fabricate tales of the self”. Techniques such as establishing rapport with the participant and conducting interviews in an environment where the participant was in control were seen as effective ways of overcoming the problem of participants’ fabrication of tales of the self.

Participants were also asked to decide upon an image which they felt captured their spiritual experiences and narratives. These images were included in the documentation of the individual contemporary spiritual narratives and contribute to the emotion and “voice” associated with each individual spiritual narrative. The extended use of images to capture personal narratives around participant spirituality had been used in other studies attempting to understand contemporary spirituality. Gottheil & Groth-Marnatt (2011) for example reported a grounded theory study of spirituality where personal narratives were collected using spiritual images.

3.2.5.2 Interviewing

I approached the data collection process from the perspective that the spiritual experiences of everyday older individuals as revealed in their narratives were significant and had a “reality” regardless of any judgment I or anyone else would seek to make as to verifiability. However, in relation to the interview data I placed a particular personal value upon material which related to (i) the “lived experience” of the individual participant; (ii) the emotional content of the material; and (iii) the appropriateness of the material in terms of the research question – namely, the material needed to reference spiritual experience. I also observed Denzin’s suggested techniques for mitigating the potential for narrative fabrication through establishing rapport with participants and through supporting participant control of location and timing of interviews (Denzin 2005, p.135)

Three phase in-depth interviews

Seventeen participants were interviewed on at least two but most frequently three occasions over the six month interview period of the narrative collection and analysis phase. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Initial interviews were taped, file notes taken and a transcript made in narrative format. For subsequent interviews, file notes were taken and the developing drafts were checked for accuracy, participant ownership and opportunities for further narrative data. At no stage was the taping of the interviews allowed to present a distraction from the story-telling. The field notes which I took were on a couple of occasions the primary initial source of data due to equipment failure. Any loss of detail or
accuracy was readily remedied in the following review of, and reflection on, their narratives by the individual participants.

Each participant reviewed their narrative on at least one occasion and in most instances on two occasions. They were encouraged at each review to check for accuracy, tone and most importantly ownership of their story. Opportunities were available for further input via phone contact, email contact and additional meetings. Several participants (e.g. Participants 1, 2, 6, 12 and 16) provided further information and comment through such opportunities.

In line with the approach suggested by interpretive interactionism, interviews were conducted in an informal and open ended manner (Denzin, 1989). No attempt was made to suggest or pre-define spiritual experience and the participant was at all times free to identify and provide details of experiences which they individually or idiosyncratically felt were spiritual. Furthermore, in line with this interview approach no set list of detailed questions was used. Rather open dialogue was employed to develop the individual participant’s narrative around spiritual experience. A broad set of trigger questions was developed for the initial interview and are provided at Appendix B - although in the conduct of the research these were only used in a limited fashion with participant 11. The tapes of these interviews and their subsequent narrative format were used to shape the following participant interviews and reflections.

The three phase in-depth interview methodology allowed for the ongoing reflection by the participants on their spiritual narratives. Participant 6 for example asked to hear the tape of his interview again as a means of reflecting further on his spiritual story and providing further data. Similarly Participant 1 used the reflection potential in the methodology to elaborate and further explore the richness of his spiritual experiences and to open up other forgotten spiritual experiences. In this sense the in-depth interview process revealed the inner realms of each participant’s spiritual experience (Gubrium & Holstein 1997, pp. 57-8) and so generated considerable data around the spiritual experience of older contemporary individuals.

3.2.5.3 Saturation
The three phase interviews process also addressed the issue of saturation (MacKinlay 2004, pp.28-29). Each participant reviewed their material on at least two occasions – except for participant 11 and sometimes amended and added to their initial spiritual story. This process
resulted in the participant reaching a stage in their story telling where edited or new information or elaborations were either repetitive or exhausted. Participants 2, 6, 9 and 17 were particular examples of this saturation process.

### 3.2.5.4 Documentation
The field review of literature followed Denzin’s requirement for a review of relevant scholarship. After the initial collection of narratives the reading of the field literature was revisited in order to keep key issues in full view as analysis was undertaken. This was not understood however as allowing the field literature to predetermine findings or any other outcomes from the narratives. A conscious effort was made at all times to avoid this pre-structuring from occurring. This was an essential feature of Denzin’s process in that it ensured that the phenomenon was not merely interpreted “in terms of the standard meaning given to it by the existing literature ... the subject matter is confronted, as much as possible, on its own terms” (Denzin, 1989, p. 55).

### 3.2.6 Data analysis
**Construction of “rich text” through “thick description”**
Denzin’s 1989 work on interpretive interactionism dedicated considerable effort into outlining the concept of “thick description” and its associated outcome of rich text characterised by verisimilitude. As Ponterotto (2006, p.541) observed there is confusion around the specifics of the term “ thick description” with Denzin’s own introduction of the concept involving eleven types of thick description. However, a number of features of the concept were commonly available to qualitative researchers. These are: (i) descriptive/textual material was developed which produced for readers “the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described” (Denzin 1989, pp.83-84); (ii) descriptive/textual material captured the emotions and reflections of participants; and (iii) descriptive/textual material was developed which supported complexity of information and subsequent multi-layered analysis and meaning.

The interviews, field notes and visual material collected during the 6 month field work phase were ultimately constructed as 17 spiritual narratives. These spiritual narratives in their final formulation for this research are presented in full in Appendix A. Each spiritual narrative was comprised of (i) an image selected by the participant which best symbolised their spiritual story; (ii) some introductory biographical detail and description of the story telling style of the participant; and (iii) the spiritual narrative of the individual voiced by that individual.
With the exception of possibly one participant whose ill health prevented full participation in the research, the individual spiritual narratives are detailed, well situated in the participant’s life and context, reflective and emotionally charged. As the researcher I was surprised at the richness of this participant material. Iterative re-development of material occurred as part of the three phase interview process – however most participants provided thick description material as both narrative and openness to observation as part of their first interview.

**Confirmation of participant “voice” and ownership**

The spiritual experiences of the participants were collected and written up as narrative by myself as the researcher. The narrative format was chosen to reflect the temporality of the stories being provided by older individuals and to capture the story telling convention which all participants adopted as they openly related their spiritual experiences. As I wrote up each individual narrative – including any additional material – I was conscious of the inherent danger of introducing my “voice” into the narrative. In order to mitigate this circumstance I checked constructed narratives against field notes – and more significantly, had each participant check and “sign off” against their own spiritual narrative. The ownership of their spiritual narratives by participants was particularly clear when they undertook these reviews and checks for “voice”. They were generally delighted to have their stories made explicit and sometimes moved to yet again re-live their experiences.

**Individual portraits of the participants**

The brief biographies of the participants were developed for voice and context. They are provided with their unique spiritual narrative in Appendix A of the dissertation. Each participant was requested to suggest an image for their spiritual narrative. This image is used to capture some quality of the individual’s experiences (Plummer 2011) and is aimed at also supporting the context and voice of the narrative.

**3.2.6.1 Data analysis and the methodology of interpretive interactionism**

Interpretive interactionism aims for the experiences of the individual to emerge from their narratives on their own terms. In other words while it was important for triangulation considerations to have the applicable research in view it was more critical to set aside any preconceptions which may arise from the field literature. For interpretive interactionism the process of analysis and interpretation involves: (i) Bracketing; (ii) Construction; and (iii) Contextualisation.
3.2.6.2 Coding and Bracketing

The coding of data method used in the bracketing phase of data analysis of the narrated experiences of spirituality, is that described by Saldana (2009, p.3; pp. 105-108) as a first cycle exploratory and motif coding method. Saldana observes that motif coding has particular applicability for narrative methodologies and for “significant elements of a story that have the potential for rich symbolic analysis” (2009, p.107).

3.2.6.3 Bracketing

The process of bracketing involved identifying key elements, phrases and statements that the participants provided in their narratives and interview reflections. These thematic elements are offered to the participants for further comment and reflection. According to Denzin (1989) bracketing enabled the researcher to uncover what is at the core of any studied phenomenon. It disaggregated the phenomenon so that its “elements and essential structures are uncovered, defined and analysed” (Denzin 1989, p. 55). Critically under this methodology the features of older person’s experiences of spirituality were established from their perspective. In my study these spiritual experiences were established and developed from the participants’ perspectives through the composition of the narratives and the subsequent discussions with the participants about the spiritual experiences associated with their narratives.

Once these participant perspectives and their associated core elements were identified, then they should be interpreted by the researcher as an informed observer. For the purposes of this study the thematic elements identified for spirituality have formed the interpretive basis for informed analysis. If possible, these informed interpretations were again discussed with the participants and either corroborated or questioned. The three phase interview process used in my study allowed for further discussion of the thematic material both from cohort and individual participant perspectives. Finally, all participants were provided with a draft summary set of the Findings of the study for further reflection and comment if they wished to do so.

3.2.6.4 Construction

Construction “builds on bracketing. It classifies, orders, and reassembles the phenomenon back into a coherent whole” (Denzin 1989, p. 60). It was a process which demonstrated or speculated how the “parts of the phenomenon cohere into a totality” (Denzin 1989, p. 60).
Where possible the analysis sought to uncover how identified elements of a phenomenon, here spirituality, affected and were related to each other.

3.2.6.5 Contextualisation
Contextualization: allowed the phenomenon under investigation to be more richly revealed because it focused on the participant’s perspective “in their terms, in their language and in their emotions” (Denzin 1989, p. 60). In this phase of the study a return was made to the older individuals and their narratives in order to gain a more comprehensive and specific understanding of how the older individual experienced and responded to their spiritual episodes.

3.2.7 Trustworthiness
Trustworthiness issues: In using a qualitative narrative approach this study sought nonetheless to obtain insights and findings which were trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln & Guba 1985) argued that the trustworthiness of qualitative research may be established by using a set of methodological principles. These principles were:

1. Sustained interaction and observation of participants in a natural or social setting: this was effected in this study through the three phase interview process.
2. Participant review of material on a regular basis: this was effected for this study through each participant reviewing their narratives on a number of occasions.
3. Introspection or Peer-debriefing: this typically involved the researcher maintaining a journal or log. During the progress of research a comprehensive log of thoughts, impressions, and methodological issues was maintained. This log was used both as a reflective tool for the researcher and as the basis for a collaborative colleague or supervisor to critique the work as it developed. Such a log was maintained during the narrative collection phase of the research and was reviewed by the thesis supervisor. The material contained in the log was consolidated into the Personal Reflection which is found in Appendix B of the present study.
4. The practice of triangulation – namely checking the researcher’s interpretation against other sources. This interpretive interactionism study is concerned with (i) triangulation of data and (ii) triangulation of analysis.
3.2.7.1 Triangulation

*Triangulation of data* was achieved by (i) collecting interview data over a period of time and on regular basis; and (ii) by participant review of data. *Triangulation of analysis* was achieved by (i) investigator triangulation and (ii) transparency of data. *Investigator triangulation* occurred when a cross referencing task was undertaken in relation to the analysis of the spiritual narratives. This involved a “blind” or independent analysis of two randomly chosen narratives against a Spiritual Narratives Map which was developed from the initial analysis of the spiritual narratives (Appendix D). This “blind” analysis was undertaken by a critical friend with experience in interpretive interactionism research.

3.2.8 Transparency of data

Transparency of data was effected through the provision of the complete set of spiritual narratives in Appendix A and the Spiritual Narratives Map against which the individual narratives were analysed. Independent analysis of the material is accessible to all researchers.

3.3 Section 2: A methodology appropriate for Research Question 2

3.3.1 Introduction

Within the research design established for this present study, the critical methodology of narrative literary criticism was chosen to analyse thematic material identified in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anne. A literary critical methodology was chosen because the Biblical narratives are approached as literature; and the method of narrative literary criticism supports the identification and interpretation of literary thematic material. In this manner the study methodologically addresses Research Question 2:

What are key thematic elements in the Biblical narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

I will not provide details around definitions and the history of literary criticism as this has been extensively covered in other literature over many decades. Useful summaries of this area in the context of Scriptural studies, are provided by Malbon (1994) Gunn (1999), and by Jenks (2011). The relationship between literature, literary criticism and qualitative research will however be discussed in the following sections.
3.3.2 Data selection

Rationale for the selection of the three Biblical narratives

The data for the analysis of the Biblical narratives was obtained by the selection of a set of narratives. Clarification about the selection of the Abraham, Anna and Simeon, and Job narratives is provided as follows. The choice of these narratives was based on considerations around: (i) representation of Old Testament and New Testament narratives in the study; (ii) the foundational significance of Abraham in the human–God relationship; (iii) the limited presence of old individuals as protagonists in the New Testament; (iv) questions of meaning-of-life issues in Job; and (v) narratives where the major protagonists are old.

3.3.3 Data analysis

Literature and literary criticism in qualitative research

This discussion around literature and literary criticism in qualitative research begins with an observation by Denzin and Lincoln regarding a foundational relationship which exists between qualitative research and the critical methodologies of the humanities: “social scientists turned to the humanities, hoping to learn how to do complex structural and post structural readings of complex texts” (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 4). In other words, social scientists dealing with data generated from interviews, case studies and other narrative-based methods identified that critical methodologies associated with complex textual analysis would also apply in the context of qualitative social science research.

Over the decades, qualitative researchers have extended the relationship that exists between literature and qualitative research in many directions. For example, some see the relationship supporting the extension of qualitative narrative research through the way literary criticism in its many forms may bridge between the “the reader and text”, between the “text and producer”, and between the “historical context and present” (Kinchelot & McLaren 1994 p. 311). Others concerned with the interpretation of qualitative data concentrate on the inevitable blurring of the data gathered and its textual representation for the purpose of analysis (Richardson & St Pierre 2005, pp. 959–978; Atkinson & Hammersley 1998, p. 131). Rebecca Luce-Kapler provides a detailed summary of literature and literary criticism in her article ‘Literature in qualitative research’ (2008) and observes “(Q)ualitative researchers may use literature as a focus for participant response either through discussion or creation; they may use literary genres to represent the data or the larger study; or they may refer to the literary text as a data source” (my emphasis)(2008, p.486). I will rely on this established use of the literary text as a data source within qualitative research to analyse the
Bible generally and the three selected Biblical narratives specifically to identify thematic material. Moreover, I will employ a literary critical methodology to undertake the analysis of thematic material so identified because of the legitimacy attributed to literary critical analysis by the qualitative research field.

**The Bible as literature and narrative literary criticism**

This study’s research design and data collection processes involve the analysis of selected Scriptural narratives in order to provide insights around Old and New Testament commentary on old age and particular issues that critically interface with old age. Such Biblical perspectives on old age and spirituality will be provided in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. There are two key presumptions underpinning the proposed literary critical methodology and associated analysis of the Biblical narratives. These are: (i) the Bible may be approached interpretively as a work of literature and so available to analysis as a complex text through such methods as narrative literary criticism; and (ii) the Bible may be conceptualised as the “world within itself”, as part of a paradigm of Biblical spirituality as argued by Schneiders and by her colleagues associated with spirituality as an academic discipline; and of my re-framing of this paradigm of Biblical spirituality in Chapter 1.

**The Bible as literature and narrative**

For the purposes of the research design of this study, the Bible requires confirmation as a rich text or culturally accepted literature in a contemporary context. This confirmation is available through the mechanism of reporting the search results for “Bible” in the MLA database for the period 2000 to 2015. During this period 6195 literary studies of or associated with the Bible are recorded. In this contemporary cultural context, therefore, the Bible remains a major focus of literary critical scholarship; and a detailed summary of the development of literary criticism in Biblical studies is provided in a publication edited by Paul House (1992). In his introduction to this edition, House observes that major theoretical literary critics such as Northrop Frye (1982) have also produced major studies on the Bible and its themes.

There are then many literary critical studies of the Bible that employ a wide range of exegetical approaches: historical, sociological and linguistic – to identify but a few. Jenks (2011) provides a summary of the range of key analytical approaches that have been employed under the broad umbrella of literary critical analysis. The literary critical method that I argue as appropriate for analysis of the selected Biblical narratives is that of narrative
criticism. Narrative literary criticism is situated with the New Literary Critics movement, which focuses on the text rather than the author or the historical context of its production (Paris 2014, pp. 12–14). Narrative criticism concentrates on identifying narrative structural elements such as plot lines, character developments, thematic material, imagery and other “signals within a text” (Powell quoted in Paris 2014, p. 16; Alter 2011, p. 13), which guide readers in deciding how to interpret the text; and narrative criticism also has an accepted presence as a method used in literary criticism associated with the Bible (Alter 2011; Gunn 1999; Wainwright 1991). Further discussion around the extended use of narrative literary criticism in Biblical research is provided by Thatcher (2007) in his analysis of the use of this method within Johannine studies. In short, narrative criticism is method within literary critical methodology, which approaches the Bible as rich text available for interpretation as a discrete entity: it may apply within the study of a discrete Biblical narrative (e.g. John’s Gospel) or within Biblical material across the full Biblical canon (e.g. feminist studies of the Scriptures).

3.3.4 The Biblical hermeneutical approach of Schneiders and associated Biblical scholars

Thematic data required for my study’s comparative analysis of contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives can be generated through employing the critical methodology of literary critical analysis of scriptural narratives. Specifically, the close reading literary critical approach of narrative literary criticism will be used to generate this thematic data. The decision path which has led to the choice of narrative literary criticism as an appropriate method to address Research Question 2 involves: (i) the argument in qualitative research for literature (including the Bible) to present as rich text and hence as a data source; (ii) the use of critical methodologies such as literary criticism as an approach for rich text analysis in qualitative research; and (iii) the creation of a body of significant Biblical research both in Australia and internationally by scholars employing a narrative literary critical hermeneutic.

A final reason for my choice of narrative literary criticism to address Research Question 2 is its use by Schneiders and associated Biblical scholars in the exegetical studies of Biblical texts. Given this study’s reliance on Schneiders’ definitional and conceptual work around spirituality and Biblical spirituality, I argue that the literary critical methodology used by such scholars when undertaking scriptural analysis is also methodologically appropriate for this study’s analysis of Biblical narratives. This is particularly the case when such narratives are
linked to old age and humankind’s relationship with their God – or in other terms, with their spirituality.

With characteristic lucidity, Schneiders outlines her approach to interpreting Scripture in her introduction to Jesus risen in our midst: Essays on the resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (2013, pp. xii–xviii). In line with the social sciences’ critical methodology of literary criticism, Schneiders works with the presumptions: (i) that the Bible (i.e. the text) canonically is a complete whole; (ii) that the literary feature of intertextuality is interpretively significant; (iii) that the text is to be approached as a unity; (iv) that “questions of characterization, plot, narrative structure and other genres, language, themes, symbolism, and so on are more significant than investigations of historical facticity, processes of composition, or parallels with other sources” (ibid., p. xiv); and (v) that the focus of interpretation is theological in that the locus of revelation is the text and not the historical moment or the authorial intention.

Schneiders, however, has a final interpretive presumption which sits apparently outside the interpretive space of literary criticism as critical methodology discipline. This relates to her purpose for interpreting the Biblical text. Schneiders makes her purpose for undertaking a literary critical analysis of Biblical text clear:

My purpose in writing them [the essays] was not to critically analyse the text for its own sake or to unravel historical conundrums or mediate disagreements between texts and scholars. My purpose was to facilitate the transformational encounter with the word of God in the interaction between the reader and the text (Schneiders 2013, p. xvi).

At this point – namely purpose - my study and that of Schneiders’ part from each other. Schneiders’ purpose was to approach the Bible within the five presumptions listed above (which are commonly shared with the critical methodology of literary criticism), and “facilitate the transformational encounter with the word of God” (p. xiv). My purpose was to approach the Bible as literature, employ the critical methodology of literary criticism to collect data around the symbolic value of old age in selected Biblical narratives, and to offer an interpretation of the data so collected through conceptual tools made available from a range of interdisciplinary fields.

I can consider this point of departure between my purpose and that of Schneiders in terms of a literary critical methodology in a number of ways. First: Schneiders’ hermeneutic of literary criticism produces data around “questions of characterization, plot, narrative
structure and other genres, language, themes, symbolism, and so on” (p. xvi), which are published in the scholarly literature, evaluated by other scholars, and used to develop scholarly debate. The use of Schneiders’ literary critical studies and data is therefore appropriate in the context of the broader literary critical field. The goal of increasing knowledge around Biblical interpretation to be publically reported as scholarship – and so engaged with scholarship such as mine – is achieved. With regard to Schneiders’ purpose which is personally “to facilitate the transformational encounter” this is understood as a statement of personal reflexivity. By clearly stating the purpose and context of her analysis Schneiders addresses the methodological consideration of reflexivity important for qualitative research. The fact that my purpose in undertaking a literary critical analysis of Biblical text is different to that articulated by another scholar is expected, acceptable and even desirable.

Second: By referencing the interactively transformative power of the text, Schneiders inhabits the same interpretative space as aesthetic philosophers such as Schiller (1983) or depth psychologists such as Jung (1967). It is this circumstance which Statements of Reflexivity in the context of qualitative analysis, address. As a researcher in a qualitative context it is philosophically understood that my interaction with the subject of my research will change me as the researcher. How I as the author of my study understand and interpret this personal change, requires recourse to such strategies as personal journaling and reflection – which in the context of my study has been captured in the Personal Reflection found in Appendix B.

Third, Schneiders expresses her use of literary critical analysis ultimately in poetic terms – she invites her readers “to enter into this mystery, to surrender to it, to live ever more deeply into it” (p. xviii). This too is an important and valid interpretive opportunity in the context of qualitative research. To begin with she has already established that her strict close reading of Biblical text occurs within a context of personal transformation. It is appropriate then that the language she uses conveys information about the intensity of her personal transformation. Moreover, as Luce-Kapler identifies in her outline of the use of literature and literary criticism in qualitative research (2008), researchers are able to employ many means to convey data arising from their research. Works of fiction, media clips, and poetry are among the avenues available for the qualitative scholar to report and reflect on findings. Some scholars associated with Schneiders’ work have taken up such options and produced imaginative yet informative responses associated with their scholarship: Barbara Green for
example wrote a literary critical analysis of Jeremiah using both close reading of text and creatively imagined scenarios (Green 2013); Anne Elvey constructed poetry around themes associated with eco-theology, spirituality, and gender within a formal literary critical portfolio (Elvey, 2006); and Elaine Wainwright creatively re-imagined the story of Martha and Mary to reflect on issues of gender, transformation and spirituality (Wainwright 2001). As an outcome of these considerations I judge that the earlier point of departure does not represent a barrier to working with Schneiders’ hermeneutic of narrative literary criticism. Schneiders is clear as to her interpretive methodology and personal purpose. This entails a hermeneutic of scriptural literary criticism which is undertaken in a declared context of orthodox Catholic Christianity. Her exegetical presumptions and her statement of reflexivity are consistent with my literary critical methodology and the associated declared reflexivity.

3.4 Section 3: Framework of Spirituality appropriate for Research Question 3

3.4.1 A Framework of Spirituality for comparison and re-contextualisation purposes

Research Question 3 asks:

Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

In order to answer this research question, this study has to identify a strategy which (i) facilitates the comparison of contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives; (ii) frames the comparison within contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives; and (iii) supports the re-contextualisation of theoretical understandings of spirituality in both the lived experience of everyday life for older Australians and in the Biblical narratives.

It has been identified in this study that a small number of peer-reviewed research Australian undertakings have reported the development and use of a Framework of Spirituality for their specific research goals (Webster 2003; Deagon & Pendergast 2102; Schmidt 2005). Each of
these frameworks contains thematic elements such as “personal transcendence”, “meaning”, “trigger experiences”, “reflection” and “individual–community expressions of spirituality”. Although lacking the term “Framework of Spirituality”, more detailed constructs or models of contemporary spirituality are to be found in the works of Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010), MacKinlay (2004) and Schneiders (1989, 2000, 2011).

With the exception of Schneiders’ modelling, each of the above-mentioned studies associated with developing spiritual frameworks used a range of research designs and methods. Deagon and Pendergast (2011) employed documentation review and extension of existing models; Webster (2003) identified five locations of spirituality from the research literature and contextualised them in terms of an existential perspective to create his Existential Framework of Spirituality; and Schmidt (2005) used a phenomenological approach to construct a framework or phenomenal essence of spiritual leisure. The aims and outcomes of these three pieces of research resulted in the development of a spiritual framework which each achieved within the boundaries that were established for the research. These are significant studies for my research in that they show where Australian scholarship has previously clarified and developed Frameworks of Spirituality. In terms of identified thematic elements, these studies are not as developed as those undertaken by Kaldor, Hughes and Black (2010) and by MacKinlay (2004). I will now discuss these latter two research studies with a view to establishing a Framework of Spirituality derived from the social science perspective.

3.4.1.1 The spiritual or life orientation framework of Kaldor, Hughes and Black

In conducting their Australian-based research Kaldor, Hughes and Black were presented with the issue of how to discuss spirituality or life orientation specifically in terms of wellbeing (2010, pp. 6567). Their response was to construct a model based on:

- personal wellbeing
- community wellbeing.

They constructed their framework after referencing a body of prior social science research work, including that of Jung and subsequent depth psychologists, Koenig, Seligman, Freud, Ellis and Watters (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, pp. 65–67). The two basic divisions of the model – personal wellbeing and community wellbeing – were each seen to contain sub-sets. Personal wellbeing is viewed as having the following components: standard of living, physical
and mental health, psychological wellbeing, life satisfaction and dealing with life’s challenges, personal security and relational wellbeing. Community wellbeing is viewed as having the following components: social capital and trust in others, social values, and voluntary contributions to society.

Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s research is important in its own social science context. It reports findings across many variables from a major survey of the Australian community. My research, however, is shaped by different research questions. Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s research has a particular focus on spirituality and wellbeing whereas this present study considers the relationship between ageing and spirituality more broadly. My study does not investigate connections between positive ageing and wellbeing along with other outcomes associated with spirituality and ageing. However, Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s research is used in this present study because of (i) their use of a broadly scoped approach to what constitutes spirituality; and (ii) their identification of a range of themes associated with spirituality or life orientation. The framework elements arising from Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s work, which will be used in my research spirituality framework are: personal interior experience; personal adjustment or maladjustment outcomes of spirituality; meaning-of-life moments; relationship orientation; social values, morality and ethics; contribution to and care for others; and potential for both positive and negative outcomes associated with spirituality. A similar and corroborating set of framework elements from the perspective of caring for aged persons is provided by the UK-based researchers Mowat and O’Neill (2013).

3.4.1.2 The spiritual framework of MacKinlay

The second work from Australian social science research around spirituality and ageing upon which I will rely for the development of the Framework of Spirituality is that reported by MacKinlay (2004). I argued in Chapter 2 that one of the most significant contributions made by MacKinlay to scholarship in the field of spirituality and ageing is her identification of thematic elements in the material obtained from older individuals through in-depth interviews and surveys. I will incorporate these elements identified by MacKinlay into this research’s framework. MacKinlay’s thematic material is summarised in Table 3.1.
Table 3.1
Meta-themes and associated elements
(Summarised from *The spiritual dimension of ageing*, MacKinlay, 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meta-themes identified</th>
<th>Associated elements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ultimate meaning in life</td>
<td>o God/Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Relationship with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o “Otherness”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Experience of the numinous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Experience of churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Response to ultimate meaning</td>
<td>o Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Personal ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Reading the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Meditation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Faith development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Atheist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-sufficiency -&gt; Vulnerability</td>
<td>o Old age as frailty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Loss of energy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Fear of dementia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wisdom -&gt; Final meanings</td>
<td>o Guilt and regrets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Tolerance for uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Peace with oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationship -&gt; Isolation</td>
<td>o Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Talking to photographs of dead loved ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o Importance of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hope -&gt; Fear</td>
<td>o Fear of death/dying (limited because of third agers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Humour</td>
<td>Not in original spirituality profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reminiscing</td>
<td>Not in original spirituality profile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The summary provided in Table 3.1 is based on the six themes used by MacKinlay (2004, pp. 222–224) for her model of the spiritual themes of ageing. I have identified and assigned the associated elements to the spiritual themes based on my reading of her work. Moreover,
there are a number of other significant themes which arise from her analysis of the spiritual materials but which are not specifically noted in terms of representing a spiritual theme. These items are of overlap importance for this present study and include: gender as a theme, ageing as a developmental task, the private nature of the spiritual material, and the importance of difference in responses to ageing as great as the thematic similarity.

MacKinlay uses her data to create a model of spirituality and ageing that uses the pre-shaped themes from the survey to argue a set of developmental axes. The primary axes (the first two meta-themes) are around ultimate meaning and responses to ultimate meaning. The way in which an individual moves along this primary set of axes will determine the individual’s engagement with the other four thematic elements. Because ultimate meaning is the individual’s spirituality this becomes MacKinlay’s model of spirituality and associated tasks. In fact, MacKinlay takes her model further. She promotes the argument for developmental movement towards spiritual maturity, characterised by: openness to change and learning, search for ultimate meaning, relationship with significant other/membership of group, transcendence of difficulties, facing the future, acceptance of the past, living with uncertainty, a sense of freedom, moving to a greater degree of interiority.

3.4.1.3 Elements of Schneider’s framework for approaching the study of spirituality

In the earlier analysis of definitions of spirituality in Chapter 1, I argued that there is considerable conceptual overlap between selected social science research around spirituality and the academic discipline of spirituality from theological scholarship. In arguing this position, I detailed Schneiders’ conceptual writings around spirituality in terms of “definition”, “approaches” and “methodologies” and indicated how her broadly conceived modelling of spirituality as an academic discipline parallels selected social science research focused on spirituality in many different research interest contexts. It is Schneiders’ concept and articulation of the anthropological approach to spirituality that best serves to create the shared territory between spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science research.

I accept that my re-framed use of Schneiders’ initial modelling of anthropological spirituality may well diverge from her later writings around spirituality and those of other theological researchers engaged with developing her work. I would argue, however, that any divergence on my part constitutes the kind of scholarship for which Schneiders herself was prescient.
enough to provide when she spoke of the ongoing narrative and needs of spirituality as a discipline in the early stages of formation: “(I)t is going to take some time to delineate precisely the subject matter of this new field and to distinguish it adequately from that of other fields but we know that we are interested in studying something that exists and that does not fit precisely into any of the existing fields of study” (Schneiders 2011, p. 15).

Schneiders’ anthropological approach to spirituality will provide framework elements derived from:

1. a definitional approach to spirituality which is grounded in human, “lived” experience, which is focused on individual and community values and relationships, which is transcendent, and which is dynamic
2. the use for interpretive purposes of insights derived from a broad range of human studies, including aesthetics, anthropology, cultural studies, literature studies, linguistics, gender studies, ecology, psychology, philosophy, and ecumenical and interfaith exchanges
3. recognition that human spirituality cannot be constrained to theologically articulated faith and that Christian theology works in partnership with spirituality, not in a superior relationship to it
4. the use of hermeneutical methodology that expects both contributions to the research discourse field and subjective development of the researcher as outcomes of the particular research
5. a research position that accepts that there are many valid approaches to the research field of spirituality and that there is no one “true” answer.

3.4.2 A Framework of Spirituality for the thesis research

My study’s framework will include elements of Schneiders’ definition and approach to spirituality, together with the research frameworks from MacKinlay’s and Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s sociological surveys and studies. The summarising Framework of Spirituality is provided in Table 3.2. It does not account for differences in framing, emphasis or nuance among the elements contributed by the different frameworks; and it represents the contributing framework elements within an integrated framework for the analysis purposes of my specific study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MacKinlay</th>
<th>Kaldor, Hughes &amp; Black</th>
<th>Schneiders</th>
<th>Framework of Spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality as a phenomenon/lived experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Types of spiritual experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The personally spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Personal adjustment/maladjustment outcomes of spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Meaning-of-life moments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Relationship orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The communally spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Social values, morality, ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Contribution to and care for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Potential for both positive &amp; negative outcomes associated with spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The transformationally spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Dynamic nature of spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Transforming lived experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality as contemporary cultural expression of whole-of-person and whole-of-society issues*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Ecumenical and interfaith exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Politics and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Secularism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Radicalisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This is not an exhaustive list and other contemporary issues may be addressed here*
3.5 Summary

In Chapter 3 of my study, I have identified the research design and associated methodologies which are appropriate to address both (i) the identified gaps in current scholarship around contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives of older individuals; and (ii) a comparative and re-contextualisation study of contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives from the perspective of current scholarship. I have argued that a multi-method qualitative research design which extends to a bricolage research approach will address the three research questions that inform my research. The specific approaches used in this research design are Denzin’s interpretive interactionism and the critical method of narrative literary criticism. This research design also incorporates a Framework of Spirituality, constructed on the basis of definitional and conceptual overlap between social science and theological perspectives. This Framework of Spirituality will be employed to facilitate the comparison of contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives associated with older individuals. It will also serve as a mechanism for the re-contextualisation of Biblical themes and current academic scholarship in terms of the “lived” spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians.
Spiritual narratives: Presentation of results

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present the results of the analysis of data which was conducted after the data collection strategy of interpretive interactionism. Such data analysis sought to identify the thematic material associated with spirituality which was internally generated by the cohort’s spiritual narratives. In conducting this analysis, I followed the process for examining rich text as outlined by Denzin and others (Denzin 1989; Denzin & Lincoln 2000); and which was articulated in detail in Chapter 3. Briefly, interpretive interactionism is a qualitative methodology, which places an individual’s intensively explored narrative at the centre of the analysis. In summary, the analysis of the 17 contemporary spiritual narratives was undertaken by following the three-stage methodology required by Denzin’s (1989) interpretive interactionism. It involved:

1. Bracketing: the bracketing phase involves identifying key elements, phrases and statements provided by the participants in their narratives.

2. Construction: the construction phase “builds on bracketing. It classifies, orders, and reassembles the phenomenon back into a coherent whole” (Denzin 1989, p. 60).

3. Contextualisation and customisation: the contextualisation and customisation phase reviews the thematic material generated from construction from the perspectives of the participant narrators. The phase seeks to establish emphases and thematic relationships in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the participants’ experiences, and to construct a model of the phenomenon in terms of those participant experiences.

The 17 narratives were generally rich in detail and yet also displayed discrete individual perspectives. These stories provided themes that were common across all the 17 individual narratives as well as issues and experiences that were unique to the individual narrator. In identifying and documenting issues and elements that arose from this narrative suite, all
issues identified were noted as either a one-off incident or as a consistent issue across a number of individuals. The individual narrators and their associated characteristics and issues were consolidated as a Spiritual Narratives Map provided as Appendix C. The diversity of the experiences identified in the 17 spiritual narratives was in itself an important feature of the discussion around the spiritual environment captured in these contemporary narratives. This feature suggested that individuals participated in a rich spiritual life. It was a spiritual life not necessarily held within a major Christian faith tradition but it was present in the understanding of human spirituality as an expression of life’s meaning and highest aspirational values.

4.2 Bracketing

From the initial analysis of the 17 spiritual narratives, 45 thematic elements were identified and these are summarised below. It is important to clarify that the identification of discrete thematic elements was not achieved at the expense of denying the richness and diversity of the spiritual material in the stories. The overall richness of the narratives was as significant as data for potential analysis as the individual thematic elements.

The identified thematic elements contained in the narrative material are summarised as:

1. atheist position held in terms of a belief in God
2. conservative religious background in terms of childhood upbringing
3. current unorthodox position in terms of belief in God; dissenting position held on some Christian church orthodoxy
4. identification as Christian
5. identification as living practical Christian values
6. values that promote religious and social tolerance
7. family memories and stories reflect pioneer past and experiences
8. family memories reflect hardship (and often compassion) associated with immediate family and community
9. dead loved ones and family members are seen
10. importance of family is stressed
11. the central role of strong women in the narrative
12. the “Nature” or “God” moment
13. “saved from death” experience
14. family trauma associated with spiritual experience
15. pre- and post-visioning – this refers to seeing events before they happen and seeing past events as though they were happening in the present
16. “gift” of family memories and stories
The next stage in the analysis of the spiritual narratives built upon this identification of discrete thematic elements. These 45 elements were considered from the perspective of overarching thematic relationships and from the goal of producing an internally generated model of spirituality for the narrator cohort.

My study identified a series of themes around which related thematic elements were clustered. These overarching themes were: religion-as-culture frame; held values frame; family frame; gender frame; sources of spiritual experience; quality and nature of spiritual experiences; ‘real’ or sensate quality of the spiritual experiences; accessing one’s spirituality – visualisation and associated techniques; prayer as a way of life; old age as a special period in the individual’s life’; reflecting consciousness expressed as: memories, ideas processing, philosophy, existential questions; and private nature of individual spiritual stories. In some
cases, I referred to these themes as “frames”. However, this was not to claim that a framing methodology (Hope 2010) was employed in this study. It can be argued that the current use of framing methodology is predominately found in the analysis of social movements such as the climate change movement and that its methodological trajectory is towards an integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Koenig 2006). Neither of these methodological pathways informed this study’s response to the research questions.

The themes arising from the identification of thematic elements are provided below and summarised in the Spiritual Narratives Map in Appendix C. The themes (and their associated elements) are:

1. **Religion as culture frame**
   - atheist position
   - conservative religious background in terms of childhood upbringing
   - current unorthodox position in terms of belief in God; dissenting position held on some Christian church orthodoxy
   - identification as Christian
   - identification as living practical Christian values

2. **Held values frame**
   - values compassion
   - values tolerance

3. **Family frame**
   - family memories and stories reflect pioneer past and experiences
   - family memories reflect hardship (and often compassion) associated with immediate family and community
   - dead loved ones and family members are seen
   - importance of family is stressed

4. **Gender frame**
   - the central role of women with strong characters in the narrative
5. **Sources of “breakthrough” spiritual experience**
   - the “Nature” or “God” moment
   - “saved from death” experience
   - family trauma associated with spiritual experience
   - pre-visioning
   - “gift” of family memories and stories

6. **Quality and nature of spiritual experiences**
   - ecstatic experience
   - temporal dislocation
   - danger associated with spiritual experience
   - inexplicable nature of experience
   - supportive nature of spirits
   - transformative nature of experience

7. **The “real” or sensate quality of the spiritual experiences**
   - spirits are seen and/or heard in experience
   - spirits are physically felt in experience
   - spirits reach out to individual before departing/disappearing

8. **Accessing one’s spirituality – visualisation and associated techniques**
   - strong visualisation abilities
   - meditation used by individual
   - visual aids (including Rosary) used
   - spirit guide or guru used (including saints)
   - dreams form part of experience
   - clairvoyant used
   - Tarot readings used
   - Reiki techniques used
   - auras form part of experience

9. **Prayer as a way of life**
Prayer can also be discussed within the “access” theme. However, for discussion purposes it has been given its own thematic status.
   - power and use of prayer
10. Old age as a special period in the individual’s life
   - old age viewed as a special time – from both positive and negative perspectives

11. Reflecting consciousness expressed as: memories, ideas processing, philosophy, existential questions
   - belief in a future – future orientation
   - pessimistic regarding future
   - emphasis on childhood reflections
   - fragility of life
   - smallness of the human individual
   - sense of destiny
   - afterlife considerations: heaven and hell

12. Private nature of individual spiritual stories
   - stories are not told to even those close to the narrator – there is an expressed fear of being considered “mad” were these spiritual experiences and stories to be told to others.

A further analysis of the themes and their originating thematic elements was next undertaken to explore as completely as possible the complex nature of each theme.

4.2.1 Religion as culture frame

Atheist position held in terms of a belief in God
The 17 narrators of this study could be placed on a religion referenced continuum ranging from “atheist” to “orthodox Christian” in terms of identifying with one of the major Christian faith traditions. An individual’s self-identification as Christian or as belonging to a particular Christian faith tradition did not allow the researcher to claim that a homogenous Christian group had been identified. There were many differences in understanding of the description “Christian” to be found among the 17 individual spiritual narrators in the study. Before taking up this issue in detail however, I briefly explored how those who identify as “atheist” still found themselves in an inescapable cultural frame arising from religion – and in the context of Western culture, from Christianity. This was important to explore because researchers and commentators may have at times placed “atheists” in a participant pool
which stood as discrete in relation to the participant pool of “Christians”. The variable so established – that is, belief or non-belief in a Christian God – may then be used to link this variable to personal characteristics such as attitudinal flexibility (cf. Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010; Robinson 2008). It was a questionable practice to pursue because the group “Christians” contained within it a wide range of characteristics. Moreover, the group “atheists” was framed within their – here Western – culture, which did not allow God or Christianity to be airbrushed from their conceptual equipment.

Two of the spiritual storytellers were very clear as to their atheist convictions – “I don’t believe in God” (Participant 1); and “I want to make it clear from the outset that I don’t have any religious convictions whatsoever” (Participant 6). It was then entirely reasonable to hold the position of non-belief in “God”: but the reference to “God” was culture-based. In the Western community, God references such things as a “monotheistic” divinity system, a male divinity, and an omniscient and omnipotent creator. While an individual may not have believed in “God”, the object of non-belief still held conceptual and cultural reality – a reality from which no one held in their culture was able to remove themselves. As much as the believer, the atheist is caught in this cultural proposition. It is argued that human spirituality is an engine of any group’s culture (Rappaport 1999; Chittister et al. 2006) through such things as creativity, love or awe of Nature, and the search for meaning. However cultural context also shapes the ways in which individuals are able to describe and reflect on spiritual experience and concepts, regardless of belief or non-belief in a religious orthodoxy. The cultural frame for spirituality is important to identify because it argues that human spirituality is expressed within a culture; and it also argues that all cultures’ expressions of spirituality are sourced in our common, core human nature. The cultural frame is also important from the perspective of the story-telling itself. As De Madeiros (2013, p. 9) argues, the way humans share stories and the forms they take are also necessarily culture driven.

**Identifying as Christian**

With the exception of Participant 6 all other storytellers reported participation in various forms of formal Christian practices at various stages in their lives. These practices included: compulsory involvement with prayers and hymns during their school years, participation in Church practices and communities associated with the major Christian faith traditions from their earliest years, taking up a Christian faith tradition in adolescence or early adulthood and attending non-conformist Christian groups in later adult life.
Participants broadly came under two experience sets in terms of their Christianity. One set may be described as having been born into a Christian faith tradition and community and having stayed within that tradition throughout their lives – including their present situation. The other set may be described as having been born into a faith tradition and community but having departed from the formal practices of their early Christian upbringing. But within both sets of Christian participation experiences, there were significant departures from, or omissions with regard to, participating in orthodox Christian faith traditions.

The first set included those who were born into a major Christian faith tradition and community and who have stayed within this circumstance. They expressed their spirituality through faithfulness to their Christian faith tradition via personal and direct prayer to God/Jesus/Mary/saints of special personal significance; via the continuation of religious practices established in early family life such as saying the Rosary; via the enjoyment of religious imagery provided by icons, statuettes, crucifixes and similar objects; and via an often extensive community network centred upon their Church. Within this group’s expression of spirituality and faithfulness there was almost no evidence of creedal commitment. Individuals within this group did not, for example, describe their spirituality in terms of belief in a triune God, the virgin birth of Christ, the importance of the Sacraments, or even the resurrection of Christ.

This first set of orthodox Christians also contained individuals who typically were willing to contend with the formal statements and practices of their “Church”. These were individuals who firmly held to the value and benefit of their orthodox Christian tradition but they did not hesitate to provide analysis and commentary around flawed Church behaviours. Individual participants in this cohort contended that: conservative orthodox Church teachings have been inappropriate in terms of dealing with a range of relationships; that corrupt and immoral behaviours have been either ignored or sanctioned by the Church (e.g. acts committed by crime figures, drug lords and by paedophile priests); and that current orthodoxies generally have been too narrowly applied in the contemporary 21st century context. These were not “young” individuals or even the “baby boomer” end of the age cohort: such dissenting commentary came from those participants in their eighties and nineties.

The second set of individuals who identified as having engaged in orthodox Christianity at some point in their lives, involved individuals who have removed themselves from the
mainstream Christian churches but who would still see themselves as somehow Christian and believing in God. The spiritual engagement of individuals in this cohort was diverse. Participant 2, for example, identified as Christian but recognised that her spiritual experiences involving visualisation, conversations with spiritual entities and engagement with New Age practices placed her well outside “orthodox” Christianity and belief in God. Participant 12 was also obviously at odds with orthodoxy but still firmly committed to his faith within Christianity. His difficulty with mainstream Church Christianity arose from what he perceived as empty ritual and creedal statements. While many of the other narrators would not place themselves in such radical positions, many made supportive references to the way other individuals choose to express their faith; for example, pride in a daughter who sought to explore her spirituality through a range of different spiritualties (Participant 4) or respect for Charismatics from those of a more traditional Christian viewpoint (Participant 16).

4.2.2 Held values frame
There were two characteristics in which all participants shared, regardless of whether they identified as “Christian” or not. These characteristics were:

- identification as living practical “Christian” values
- valuing and promoting religious and social tolerance.

Identification as living practical “Christian” values
All participants identified with the touchstone Christian values of care, compassion and respect for human rights. This was also the case for the atheist Participants 1 and 6. It was also the case, however, that Participant 1 was pessimistic about how these values would eventually be defeated by those negative human characteristics of greed and lust for power. Specifically, many narrators expressed the view that their personal spirituality was best seen in practical terms, in how they lived a Christian way of life. This was specifically noted with regard to personal spirituality. Participant 5, for example, stated, “I have always tried to live my life in a way which follows Christ’s message of fellowship and responsible behaviour”; and Participant 10 similarly observed, “I said we weren’t big on organised religion, but our family consciously lived a Christian life. We were always aware of acting in a Christian way.”

The connection between spirituality and loving behaviour was also evident in the comments of atheist Participant 6: “So what is ‘spiritual’? It leaves you with good feelings not bad ones? … almost every year my partner and I go to the Caulfield Cup … my Dad’s ashes are scattered
near this racecourse. I know he loved me: and so perhaps that love is also what I am feeling there at this time of year.”

Valuing and promoting religious and social tolerance
The other characteristic common to all spiritual storytellers was the declared value they placed on religious and social tolerance. This in some instances appeared to be the case not because they had always been the recipients of such tolerance but because they had on occasions experienced the very opposite, in terms of prejudice and bigotry. Participant 8’s story was a case in point here. Overall, however, participants consistently made the observation that although they were Presbyterians or Catholics, for example, they felt all individuals should be allowed to make their own way; and that religious faith typically had not stood in the way of making friendships and supporting community life. Participant 16 expressed this well: “We lived in country areas in railway houses, and there was always a spread of faiths in these country communities. Everyone mixed with everyone else with the women in particular being very close.”

4.2.3 Family frame
Given that culture and values figured strongly in the spiritual stories of the participants, it was not surprising that similar prominence was given to the family context. Most spiritual storytellers situated their spiritual experiences within a family frame; and often extended this frame back into the pioneer experiences of their families. Culture, values, memories and reflection were all captured in the family context.

The narrators’ family memories often revealed the hardships associated with the pioneer experiences of their immediate family and community. This aspect of the story-telling was again typically linked to examples of compassion and care by community members for each other. Participant 9 observed of her mother that “(she) was an exceptional and compassionate woman. As an example of this let me tell you how she helped an old swaggie. He had camped away from our property but when she hadn’t seen him for some time she went looking for him. She found the swaggie seriously ill and befouled. She put him in a wheelbarrow, wheeled him home, cleaned him up and nursed him back to health. She wouldn’t see anyone suffer if she could help. I loved her dearly.”

About half of the spiritual narrators reported seeing dead loved ones and family members. There was no ambiguity about these sightings: individual dead family members were
described in detail and as seeking to interact with the narrator or a family member closely connected with the narrator. Some narrators stated that the family member was actually present, while others stated that the family member was a “vision”. In any case, the family members with whom they shared closeness in life were also experienced as being close to the individual narrator in spite of having died. One of Participant 8’s experiences was typical of this aspect of the stories: “I also saw a figure of him (my husband) one night by the TV. Again it was very clear. My husband used to wear headphones so that the sound of the TV did not disturb me. His figure was standing by the TV in the lounge room fixing the gadget which made this noise control work. He was dressed in his nice shirt and pants, of which he was very fond. It was a very clear image of him. I told my sons and a niece about this experience.”

The importance of family was stressed by almost every narrator. Even where there was no explicit reference to the importance of family, the background significance could be inferred from the individual’s spiritual stories. Families were the embedded source of values and the material of reflection. They positioned the narrator looking back generations into the past and forwards looking to those who followed on. If spiritual stories were shared, it was typically with a close member of the narrator’s family. Participant 10 captured the way the elements of family, values and reflection came together: “And that’s how I too have tried to live my life. I’ve helped out where I can; and just kept on making the best of my situation. I loved my family and I still love having their photos about me. They still leave me with the gift of happy memories.”

Participant 2 would appear to run counter to the observation regarding the importance of family in the individual’s spiritual experiences. Participant 2’s early family experience was one of rejection and abuse; yet her she viewed her spiritual experiences in this context as the means by which she was protected in this abusive environment. Participant 2’s relationship with her own children was also positively framed in terms of spiritual experience.

4.2.4 Gender frame

I commenced this section of the analysis relating to gender with a return to the introductory comments regarding the individual narrators. Most storytellers were women (14 women and three men) and most were in their late seventies or older. The spiritual stories of this cohort did not immediately yield a feminist frame: this was a layer of education and language to
which most narrators had not had access. This being said, the stories of the women and of two of the men allowed the inference to be made that feminist issues and female spirituality were linked in these narratives.

The central role of strong women was evident in approximately two-thirds of the spiritual narratives. The narrators referred to grandmothers and mothers as compassionate, caring, skilful and resourceful, courageous, and faithful partners to men who were often damaged by toil or war. Almost all of the spiritual narratives described the ways these remarkable female characters held their families and communities together. It was also clear and probably to be expected that it was these women who nurtured their children’s spiritual development through Bible stories and nightly prayer or saying the Rosary. Interestingly, this “strong woman” motif was also played out in the way the narrators viewed their own daughters – or indeed daughters-in-law. Participant 13, for example, commented with some pride, “My daughter too has faith. She observes Mass and joins in with her Church community. But she really stands up for herself and is not backward in speaking her mind. She has told the priest that his services are too long for older people to cope with.” Participant 16 noted the way her “modern” daughter was handling the tragic illness of her baby grandson as a grace:

M’s mother is my youngest daughter. She was very independent – a professional modern woman. She already had two beautiful daughters before she had M, but it has been the birth of M with these terrible health challenges which has changed her the most. From being gifted with almost everything, she now has become aware of the other side of life. My daughter is so much more compassionate now; and she is aware of all the children in M’s hospital ward, not just her own child. Perhaps this gift of compassion given to my daughter is the answer to my prayers.

The other important way in which gender issues played out in these spiritual narratives was the way some of the narrators referenced Mary and the female saints. This was largely a female Catholic characteristic, but interesting issues arose here. First, pictures and statues of Mary were evident in personal living rooms of the narrators: this is a close domestic relationship. It may be that these were the “habit” ornaments of a lifetime, but it seemed that, at least in old age, some narrators were using these images of Mary as entry points to prayer and developing their spirituality. Participants 9 and 15 were illustrative of this personal relationship with female spirituality in the Godhead: and in the case of Participant 9
this was a relationship to which she had come in recent old age. In a similar and more local pioneer way Saint Mary Mackillop was used by a number of Catholic women narrators.

4.2.5 Sources of “breakthrough” spiritual experience
The narrators of the spiritual stories provided the study with insights into the sources of their spiritual experiences. These sources were discussed as discrete thematic elements, but individual narrators may in fact have experienced many of the sources as a result of having several spiritual episodes, either in their life experiences or through bearing witness to those of loved ones. In short, a narrator’s description of their spiritual experience may have referenced one or more “sources” themes. The sources of spiritual experience described in this section were events external to the narrator and these experiences broke into the everyday world of the narrator.

The “Nature” or “God” moment
The majority of narrators identified their reaction to the awe and power of Nature as spiritual. This was true for both atheist and self-identified Christians, although in this particular set of 17 older individuals, it was the two atheist participants who identified most strongly with Nature as providing a spiritual experience. Again, even between these two participants, their experiences represented individual reactions to events. For Participant 1, Nature created an ecstatic moment of pure “being”, where the mind was quiet and a kind of grace was encountered. For Participant 6, however, Nature was experienced as awe and power and the experience excited the mind rather than quietening it.

The spiritual association with Nature was a theme that ran through almost all the narratives, even though it was not always associated with such central experiences as those just described. The beauty of the night a child was born; the “alive” quality of Uluru; the attraction and sound of water and waves, rainforests and roses – all provided important backdrop context to the various narrators’ spiritual tales. This link between Nature and humankind was as old as the human record itself (World Pantheism Movement n.d.) and its appearance in the spiritual experiences of the contemporary storytellers attested to the unchanging and ongoing need for humans to stay connected to the natural world.

In a similar way to Nature breaking into the individual’s world as a spiritual moment, some participants referred to “God moments”. These were breakthrough faith experiences where the individual had an insight which they directly associated with God at work in their
personal life. Participant 12, for example, was struggling to find a relationship with God and was almost at the point of pulling out of a retreat. He continued:

Then, while I was munching my cornflakes, I heard an inner voice say, “If you want someone to climb a mountain, I’m your man. I will be cut and bruised and may break a leg but I will be there. Why not having got halfway up your mountain think the view is a fine one from here – and it’s been a good physical work out?” Then after a short pause the thought came “God loves me where I am”.

For Participant 12, this was his “God moment”. Participant 17 also referenced a spiritual experience in terms of a “God moment”. This participant’s decision to become a nun was formed around such a moment: “I was walking past a house where a poor family lived: it flashed through my mind – a God moment if you like – that perhaps I could help. I felt a nun’s life and work as a sister would provide this opportunity to help.”

Witness

The act of witnessing the spiritual experiences of others was another route to spiritual experience disclosed by the narrators. By recording the spiritual experiences of those close to them – or in the case of Participant 3, being present as witness to a “God” moment – participants were caught up in personally significant spiritual events.

“Saved from death” experience

A number of the spiritual narratives arose from situations where the participant survived a life-threatening incident or had a close personal association with such an incident. Participant 5 recounted how as a young child she experienced a “near death experience” – one that she only came near to understanding through her much later reading of the works of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. This was her first spiritual experience and the basis of her first narrative. Participant 2 felt strongly protected by spirits when, by chance, she missed being involved in a horrific road accident. Participant 3 witnessed the impossible recovery of a young soldier from terrible wounds – saved through prayer; and Participant 14 attributed her survival of many life-threatening illnesses throughout her life to her spiritual practices.

Trauma associated with spiritual experience

Closely aligned to the “escape from death” theme, was that associated with some form of trauma occasioning a spiritual experience. Participants’ stories consistently linked personal
or family trauma to situations giving rise to spiritual experiences. Participant 7 recounted how an encounter with a woman seeking help in an engulfing storm resulted in one of her earliest experiences with her own spiritual gifts and nature. Participant 12 noted how his struggle with depression and his search for personal meaning within his orthodox faith was associated with his breakthrough spiritual moment. Participant 15 saw her personal strength in overcoming complications from her cancer treatment as directly linked to her spiritual life as an orthodox Catholic: “Certainly at that stage, without my faith I would have jumped off a cliff. My mother used to say to me ‘You’re a stubborn little beggar’. And without a certain strength of character which lives with my faith I could not have tackled the next part of this cancer experience.”

**Pre-visioning and post-visioning**

Another source of a number of participants’ breakthrough spiritual experiences and stories arose from personal encounters with pre-visioning. While this source of the spiritual experience appeared in a quarter of the narratives, the particular experiences and stories were striking. In the case of Participant 6 – an “atheist” narrator – it provided the only spiritual experience for which, for him, there was no possible explanation.

Pre-visioning was probably associated with the strong visualisation capacity found in many of the narrators: but its association with temporal dislocation resulted in rich and powerful stories. Participant 7 had experienced the gift of “knowing” something would happen before it actually did. As a child, she experienced many examples of this – and it was not a comfortable gift for a child to have: “(So) these kinds of events played out through my early years; and while no one in my family bothered me about it, I was concerned. It was clear that no one else was seeing or hearing things – and yet I was. I became worried that I might be odd.” Participant 6 told the story of recently sitting in a coffee shop in Sydney’s Central Station when suddenly he saw his long-dead mother and himself as a young child walking past then away from the station: “Of all my experiences, this is the one I absolutely have no answer to. It was definitely me and my mother. It is a strange one.” Participant 8’s father was aware of danger and ill-health for his family ahead of events; and Participant 10’s brother was similarly gifted, although his pre-visioning appeared to concern events beyond the family group.
4.2.6 Quality and nature of spiritual experiences

Just as there were a variety of ways in which individual narrators experienced their spiritual events, their stories also revealed a variety of qualitative features associated with the experiences. The qualities associated with the spiritual events included:

1. Ecstatic experience: the ecstatic or “Wow” quality to a number of the experiences revealed in the narrators’ stories was common to approximately a third of the participants. This was, of course, associated with the breakthrough spiritual event. Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 12 ascribed this quality to some of their events.

2. Temporal dislocation: time was experienced in a “slowed” or out of sequence fashion in a number of the experiences. Participant 1’s ecstatic moment appeared to capture him in a timeless, compressed moment of peace and joy; Participant 2’s unusually long wait at a set of lights saved her life – something she attributed to being spiritually protected; Participant 7’s pre-visioning gift meant time in its usual sense was but a part of her life’s temporal experience; Participant 6’s experiences with his “slowed down” holiday moment and with the significant viewing of his mother and himself as a small child also revealed temporal dislocation to be a feature of some spiritual events.

3. Danger associated with spiritual experience: as discussed in the characteristics around sources of spiritual experience, danger to the narrator’s life or a trauma associated with a loved one often was associated with the spiritual event. This was the case with individuals sitting outside an orthodox Christian context (e.g. Participant 2); and it was also the case for those within such a context (e.g. Participants 13 and 14).

4. Inexplicable nature of experience: the majority of the narrators commented on the inexplicable nature of their experiences or those of someone very close to them. This was again true for the full range of individuals from atheists to those in an orthodox faith religion. Some narrators attempted to verify their experience by referring to how they tried to corroborate the experience with relatives: “I told my sons and a niece about this experience” confirmed Participant 8; or they attested to the honesty of a source (Participant 10); while others described how these experiences introduced concerns around their sanity or claim to be a normal person (Participants
2 and 7). In short, the mysterious nature of their spiritual stories was a constant feature of the narratives. Interestingly, those storytellers who actively followed the Catholic faith tradition appeared not to find their experiences inexplicable or, at least, they were unsurprised about their mysterious nature.

5. Supportive nature of spirits: as a general observation, where a narrator experienced spirits – either directly or in a vision – these spirits were accepted as being supportive or protective. Participant 5’s story, for example, about the circumstances surrounding the birth of her daughter, had as an unambiguous conclusion that God was present with her in that potentially life-threatening moment.

6. Transformative nature of experience: around half of the spiritual narrators referred to how their experiences changed them or transformed their lives in a significant way. Participant 12 described how his “God” moment allowed him to be freed from a fear of God; and Participant 9 pointed to the reflective opportunities of old age as a change outcome in the growth of her personal spirituality.

4.2.7 The “real” or sensate quality of the spiritual experiences

A perceived sensate quality to the spiritual experience was present in the majority of stories. While this characteristic related to the “quality” element outlined earlier, it is stressed here as a stand-alone item because it both formed part of the need for “witness” felt by many of the participants and emphasised how “real” the experiences appeared to the individual narrators. The “real” and highly sensate quality of the spiritual experiences was captured through the following:

1. Spirits were seen and/or heard in the spiritual experience. This was the case of “atheist” Participant 6’s recent sighting of his mother and him as a child in the 1950s; and Participant 3’s sighting of her dead husband.

2. Spirits were physically felt in the spiritual experience. Individual narrators reported literally feeling spirits touching or brushing them. Participant 10 felt a “moth-like” touching against her hair and then identified this as her dead brother brushing her hair; Participant 2 felt protective hands pressing down on her face to alert her to a dead friend’s presence; and Participant 7 described how she felt her mother stroking her hair as she fell asleep or
awoke, and she noted that this was often in conjunction with seeing her dead mother present about her.

3. Spirits reached out to individuals before departing or disappearing. In a number of stories, the individual narrator told how a dead loved one returned to reach them. As an example, Participant 9 described:

After my husband died I moved into a self-contained unit. There one evening I saw my husband standing in the bedroom in his favourite striped pyjamas. He was reaching his hand out to me as if he wanted me to go with him: and I’m certain I heard him say to me, “All you have to do is hold my hand and I’ll show you the road home”. I tried and tried to reach him because I so wanted to go with him. But I couldn’t reach him. He faded and left the room. I was so shaken by this vision and so distressed I couldn’t go with him because he had been such a wonderful husband. When I told the care staff and others about what had happened they told me not to be concerned. “It just wasn’t your time to go with D…” I suppose that’s right.

4.2.8 Accessing one’s spirituality – visualisation and associated techniques

The diversity of experiences evident in the spiritual narratives of the study’s 17 participants was also reflected in the range of techniques by which the storytellers sought to engage with their spiritual natures. Some techniques were more commonly used than others.

Strong visualisation abilities

The narrators described using visualisation to “place” themselves in environments where they could reflect on issues or be calm. Participant 2 visualised a rainforest where she could meet spirit guides; Participant 7 “travelled” to a favourite vantage point at Fingal Beach to reflect; and the spiritual stories of Participants 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 13 contained episodes which were extremely vividly portrayed.

Meditation used by individuals

Meditation techniques were employed by a number of participants for a range of outcomes. Participant 1 used meditation as a technique for quieting the mind and seeking space for reflection; Participant 2 used meditation in association with visualisation to journey through rainforests to engage with spirit gurus; Participant 7 did not use the term “meditation” but
confirmed a similar activity as allowing personal space and time for just “thinking”: “I have never been taught meditation – yet it is something I’ve always done. I call it my thinking time”; and Participants 12 and 17 used meditation to deepen their faith within the Christian context – although even here there was difference. Participant 12 meditated within a breakaway Catholic communion group while Participant 17 stayed within the Catholic tradition, focusing on a deepening relationship with God in the context of that privilege of ageing – letting go.

**Visual aids, including Rosary beads used**

Participants explained through their stories that they used a range of visual aids to access experiences or phenomena which they designated as spiritual. For individuals from an orthodox faith tradition, this commonly meant saying the Rosary – often with reference to the visualisation stages associated with the practice. Similarly, individuals within this tradition used Catholic iconography, including statues of Mary and Christ and images of saints that held particular significance for them. However, visual aids were also used by participants who framed their spirituality outside the orthodox faith traditions. Participant 1, for example, used the paintings of a particular Romantic artist famous for landscapes and seascapes in order to capture that moment of mind-quietness which he perceived as spiritual. Similarly, Participant 6 referred to images of cosmic phenomena as creating in him that sense of awe and cosmic power that gives a spiritual dimension to Nature.

**Other access techniques**

Across the participant cohort there was further evidence of access techniques being used. Some were associated with a couple of participants and included using spirit guides or gurus. Other examples of access techniques were associated with only one individual narrator and included: the use of active dreaming (Participant 6); and the use of clairvoyants, Tarot readings, Reiki techniques, and aura readings (Participant 2).

**4.2.9 Prayer as a way of life**

With the exception of the atheist narrators, most of the other storytellers believed in the power and use of prayer. Even atheist Participant 1’s quiet time with the Quakers seemed to suggest that being in a “prayerful” environment was a valued experience. This characteristic regarding the power and use of prayer arising from the spiritual stories played out in a number of ways:
1. Prayer was undertaken in order to save individuals or their loved ones from danger or ill health. This was evident in the narratives of Participants 13, 14 and 16. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this power of prayer was the conversion experience of Participant 3 after witnessing the saving power of prayer for a young soldier. Prayer was perceived as being able to bring about actions in the material world.

2. Prayer was used as a means of establishing an individual and deepening relationship with God. This was true of the non-conforming Participant 2; and for orthodox followers of various faith traditions – Participants 5 and 17 being examples of this.

3. Prayer was practiced in a communal setting to provide group support for individuals in need from both within and without the community. Participants 12 and 16 referred to this use of prayer. Charismatic prayer groups were referred to in one of the stories – although none of the participants had any direct experience of this use of prayer.

4. Another community aspect to the use of prayer was its importance in family memories. Saying prayers around the table before meals, before going to bed and as part of a domestic routine were all important memories around family life and a caring, compassionate environment.

5. Although prayer was identified in the orthodox Christian context of individual and group spirituality, it is the relationship aspect of prayer that is underscored here. This is because the prayer relationship was with God, Jesus, Mary and important saints, but not with the more conceptually difficult “disembodied” Holy Spirit.

Within this group of 17 older individuals, prayer was largely referenced as a personal undertaking or one shared within an intimate family situation. For example, there were references to praying in a Church context and as noted earlier, Participant 16’s prayer life was conducted actively in a community setting as well as being a personal practice. However, most descriptions of the use of prayer by the narrators was in a private, personal or intimate family context.
4.2.10 Old age as a special period in the individual’s life

Old age was viewed as a special time in the stories of the majority of the older individuals. Generally, it was seen as an opportunity to follow their spirituality – one which in the case of some participants was either interrupted or not taken up in their earlier years (Participants 2 and 9 being examples of this). The spirituality of old age stood apart from these individuals’ ongoing commitment to the “Christian” approach to living described in Section 1. This was seen as a sort of “gift” available in old age, where prayer or personal dialogue with God – however the divinity was conceptualised – could be deepened. Participant 17 gave this aspect of spirituality and old age its most powerful expression:

Old age provides you with challenges and opportunities with regard your spirituality. As you get older, you have to face the reality of letting things go. Some find this hard, but I don’t. Now I have time to reflect and develop my prayer life. This time of “letting go” is actually one of the blessings you get. As I said, I continue to pray but the form my prayer takes has changed. In fact, my prayer now involves fewer words – it is better expressed as a quieter, deeper relationship with God. I have been given the grace to let go.

It would be wrong, however, to fail to give voice to the other side of old age to which a few narrators drew attention. Participants 10 and 4 both spoke about old age being a painful and challenging period in the way that the struggle to maintain health and independence becomes particularly critical. In terms of their spiritual life, both participants continued to be grateful for their Christian values and personal spirituality. However, old age challenged them with questions about the ongoing meaning of their lives. For these participants, it was wrestling with the difficulties of old age that comprised the spiritual event.

4.2.11 Reflecting consciousness expressed as memories, processing ideas, philosophy and existential questions

Not only did the spiritual narrators offer descriptions of their spiritual experiences, they also provided reflections upon them. These reflections revealed diverse and at times diametrically opposing perspectives upon spiritual experience and its meaning. The major issues arising from the participants’ reflections upon their experiences included:

1. Belief in a future orientation: around one-third of the participants were forward looking in their life orientation. They were looking to achieve and participate in the
present. This held true for participants in their 60s and it did for some in their 90s: Participants 2 and 3 captured this situation.

2. Pessimistic regarding future: one of the participants (Participant 1) looked towards the future through a pessimistic lens: “my personal outlook on life is pessimistic; and I believe that in the long term human society will implode – dragged down by the greed and moral bankruptcy of the powerful few”. Having said this, Participant 1’s stories revealed an individual taking on the challenge of ongoing personal growth in spite of this pessimistic lens.

3. Emphasis on childhood reflections: as discussed in Section 4.2.3, there was an emphasis in many of the participants’ narratives on childhood and early life memories. These are revisited in terms of emotional touchstones and comfort; in terms of confirming values; and in some cases, dealing with unresolved anger and insecurities.

4. Fragility of life: two of the participants (Participants 1 and 4) reflected on how their experiences left them with the sense of the frailty of human life, although this was considered in the broader context of the awesomeness of Nature and the capacity of human beings for compassion.

5. Smallness of the human individual: in a similar vein to the reflections on the frailty of life, three participants (Participants 1, 6 and 8) provided commentary around their spiritual experiences in terms of the smallness of the human individual and how it was difficult to conceptualise the “human” in the face of the vastness of creation.

6. Sense of destiny: some participants associated their spiritual experiences and natures with the notion of personal destiny. Participant 3 linked prayer and the individual’s destiny: “I pray to God for the strength each day to do work which is practically helpful – even here in this place I still try to be a help. Without wanting to sound weird I believe that Destiny places you in a situation, but prayer directs you in how to respond.” Participant 15 provides similar commentary: “Now, I really don’t want to be here but I believe that this is where God wants me to be at this particular time. I don’t understand why – but I do accept it. There is a reason I’m
here: there is a reason for everything. Perhaps there is someone here I have to connect with. God will show me.”

7. Afterlife considerations including thoughts on heaven and hell: there were a number of references in the spiritual narratives to an afterlife. Centenarian Participant 8, for example, provided a somewhat whimsical view of getting to heaven. She offered: “I also wonder about what happens when we die. I have a friend who is a Methodist. She says we mustn’t fret about it. Her view of what happens is this: when a person dies they have to visit all the planets and heavenly bodies on their way to heaven. It is a long journey. I can’t say I agree with this vision of what happens when we die – I think it’s a quicker trip to heaven; but if her vision works for her then that’s fine.” Afterlife considerations, however, were not a particular focus of the ageing individuals in this cohort. Perhaps this was because the “real” experiences associated with meeting departed loved ones had left many with the certainty of an afterlife of some form or another.

8. Meaning-of-life reflections: there were only a few examples throughout these spiritual narratives of specifically articulated statements about “the meaning of life”. Participants 4, 12 and 17 took up the issue in terms of meeting the challenge of physically ageing.

4.2.12 Personal and private nature of spiritual experience
Two-thirds of the participants had consciously kept their personal spiritual narratives hidden. They were personal stories that were either told to no other person or only to a special family member or friend. There were a number of reasons behind this silence around individual spiritual experiences. First, participants believed that sharing these spiritual experiences would leave them open to unwelcome commentary about their sanity. They thought other people would think they were “mad”. It might be argued that this is one of the social roles of orthodox Christianity in our rational Western culture because it gives permission to individuals to openly share and to admit to their spiritual natures. Second, these spiritual narratives were highly personal; and this also placed them in a social territory that was not commonly discussed with acquaintances or even close friends or family members. Third, some individual storytellers were uncertain as to whether their experiences actually merited the term spiritual. These claims were possibly also linked to issues of personal confidence in verbally giving expression to their experiences; or even in giving
legitimate value to their experiences. In any case, within the definition boundaries of this research such individuals’ stories were certainly spiritual, and richly so.

4.3 Interpretive interactionism: Construction, contextualisation and customisation of spirituality for contemporary older Australians

The bracketing phase allowed the 45 thematic elements identified in the spiritual narratives to be brought under 12 umbrella themes. The next, or construction, phase of the methodology (Denzin 1989) required the researcher to consider these umbrella themes in terms of allowing the phenomena to be considered as a conceptual model or pattern. In short, the task here was the construction of the internally generated model of spirituality which had been given expression in the spiritual narratives of the study’s 17 older individuals. The task immediately at hand was to allow the voices of the 17 spiritual narrators to:

- be further re-worked in the construction phase of the Denzin methodology. The outcome of this phase of working with the spiritual narratives was to reveal any modelling and sequential dynamics
- be re-visited one final time in the contextualisation–customisation phase with the view to establishing on a cohort basis the contemporary narrators’ construct of spirituality.

There was of course the important discussion about how this emergent spirituality, which had been developed and customised by the contemporary older individuals, sat with the Framework of Spirituality developed in Chapter 3. This particular discussion formed part of Chapter 9: Contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives – findings and implications of the study, where the findings and implications of the study in terms of the research questions were located. A summarising Thematic Table was developed to assist in determining these findings.

4.3.1 Construction of spirituality as evidenced through thematic analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives

The first part of this chapter identified 45 thematic elements arising from the narratives provided by the participants. These 45 thematic elements were then organised in thematic relationship around 12 themes, which created part of the model of spirituality for this cohort.
of older contemporary individuals. The 12 relational themes were: religion as culture frame, values frame, family frame, gender frame, breakthrough sources of spiritual experience, accessing the individual’s spiritual nature, qualities of spiritual experience, reality of experience, power and use of prayer, identifying old age as special, use of reflecting consciousness, and private or hidden nature of experience. From these 12 model thematic elements it was possible to construct a five-part sequence. This was:

**Part 1: The spiritual experience as phenomenon**
- Sources of spiritual experience:
  - breakthrough
  - accessed.
- Qualities associated with the spiritual experience:
  - “real” or sensate quality of the spiritual experience.

**Part 2: The personally spiritual (the spiritual experience was consciously accommodated within a personal frame of reference)**
- Experience held private
- Witness
- Prayer.

**Part 3: The communally spiritual (externally focused outcomes of the spiritual experience)**
- Held values frame and values-driven actions.

**Part 4: The culturally spiritual (socialising the spiritual experience)**
- Religion as culture frame
- Family frame
- Gender frame.

**Part 5: The transformationally spiritual (spiritual experience and reflecting consciousness)**
- Reflecting consciousness expressed as memories and existential questions
- Old age as special.
The sequence identified through the meta-themes was further nuanced by the dynamic relationships, which were revealed through the manner in which the 17-participant cohort related to the meta-themes. This was evidenced by an examination of the emphases and priorities ascribed to the meta-themes by the cohort. In terms of the interpretive interactionism procedures, this was the contextualisation and customisation of the cohort model of spirituality.

4.3.2 Contextualisation and customisation of the cohort model of spirituality

In order to further identify how the individual older participants had experienced and engaged with their spiritual experiences, each of the five parts of the sequence pattern was examined for cohort contextualised emphases and priorities.

Priorities and emphases: contextualising and customising the cohort’s relationship to the meta-themes

The five “sequencing” patterns or meta-themes were: experiencing the spiritual phenomenon; the personally spiritual – the spiritual experience is consciously accommodated within a personal frame of reference; the communally spiritual – the spiritual experience orients the individual within their community; the culturally spiritual – the spiritual experience orients the individual within their culture; and the transformationally spiritual – the spiritual experience is revisited reflectively and facilitates personal development. Each of these meta-themes found significant representation within the narrator cohort. There were, however, areas within and between the meta-themes that were attributed greater priority and emphasis than others by the 17 contemporary older individuals. Four themes received greater emphasis than others. These were:

1. The religious–cultural frame: all participants, including the atheist participants, were represented in the religious–cultural frame from the perspective of being situated in contemporary Western European culture.

2. The importance of family: 14 of the narrators situated many aspects of their spiritual lives in the context of their family, in terms of reaching back to grandparents and extending to children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. This generational stretch had its own spiritual significance for some; but usually the family was seen as the place where spiritual practices were sourced and nurtured and where memories were located for a lifetime gift of reflection.
3. The power and use of prayer – reflecting consciousness: 13 of the spiritual narrators prayed. If extended to the practice to meditation, 16 of them participated in prayer or prayer-like practices. The use of prayer or prayer-like practices varied widely across individuals within the cohort, and this variability was discussed. If extended yet further by the placement of prayer within the broader territory of reflecting on spiritual experiences, then all participants found a place in this meta-theme of reflecting on spiritual experience.

4. The values frame of living a practical “Christian” life – including tolerance and inclusivity: all participants supported following a lifestyle that was shaped by the core Christian values of compassion, love and equality.

For this cohort of 17 older contemporary Australians, therefore, the issues that were accorded greatest prominence were those around: (i) relationship between the individual and culture/society (values-based everyday living/cultural assumptions); and (ii) the individual and their reflections (prayer/family or generational memory). The emphases established through contextualising and customising the spiritual experiences had significant implications for identifying the dynamic nature of the model of spirituality generated by the 17-participant cohort. First: it suggested spirituality was expressed as an iterative dynamic between the individual and the culture; and between the individual and the local community in which they were situated. Paradoxically the individual could only grow their individuality and spirituality through a process of externally focused interactions with others – extending from the family to the widest stretch of the community. Second: the cohort gave similar prominence to the introvert behaviour of prayer and conscious reflection upon experiences and memories, and this was another aspect of the dynamic nature of the model of spirituality generated by the 17-participant cohort. The dynamic quality of introversion was realised as the individual re-visited and re-interpreted the experience for their individual circumstance. This introvert dynamic also appeared most linked to the value placed on old age by some of the spiritual narrators. Third: when the two dynamics – extravert relationship to the community and introvert personal reflection – were considered together, yet another dynamic was identified for the cohort’s model of spirituality. The extrovert dynamic of individual–community and the introvert dynamic of individual–interior reflection also stood in a dynamic relationship. The forces at play within the cohort-generated model of spirituality argued that human spirituality was fundamentally a dynamic and enlivening entity.
4.4 Cohort model of spirituality

The interpretive interaction analysis of the 17 spiritual narratives argued for a cohort model of spirituality, which involved:

1. **Thematic content:** 45 thematic elements, which stood in relationship to 12 overarching themes. These overarching themes were: religion as culture frame; held values frame; family frame; gender frame; sources of spiritual experience; quality and nature of spiritual experiences; “real” or sensate quality of the spiritual experiences; accessing one’s spirituality – visualisation and associated techniques; prayer as a way of life; old age as a special period in the individual’s life; reflecting consciousness expressed as memories, ideas processing, philosophy, existential questions; and private nature of individual spiritual stories.

2. **Sequence:** Five meta-themes. Sequencing of the 12 themes identified a pattern of five meta-themes. The meta-themes were: spirituality as a phenomenon/lived experience; the personally spiritual; the communally spiritual – consequences and outcomes of the spiritual experience; the culturally spiritual – socialising the spiritual experience; and the transformationally spiritual. These five meta-themes suggested a sequence or pattern where:

   i. the spiritual phenomenon is experienced
   ii. the spiritual experience is consciously accommodated within a personal frame of reference
   iii. the spiritual experience orients the individual within their community
   iv. the spiritual experience orients the individual within their culture
   v. the spiritual experience is revisited reflectively and facilitates personal development and transformation.

This sequence did not work in a static lock-step manner. The relationships between meta-themes, themes and thematic elements as evidenced by the spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians were dynamic.

3. **Dynamics:** The thematic emphases generated by the cohort argued for spirituality as a dynamically complex entity. Iterative engagement associated with an individual’s
spirituality was identified in: extravert engagement with community and culture, introvert engagement with the individual’s reflecting consciousness, and the interaction between personal reflection and community and/or cultural actions.

4.5 Summary

This chapter provides an analysis of the spiritual narratives of 17 contemporary older individuals. The narratives as rich text yielded 45 thematic elements, which in turn were bracketed into 12 themes – without reference to “the standard meaning given to it by the existing literature” (Denzin 1989, p. 55). A final construction of the themes into a five-phase meta-theme model produced a cohort-derived model of spirituality, which exhibited a number of important dynamics. Individual participants could be argued to engage in dynamic, iterative processes in terms of their spiritual experiences. One dynamic situated the individual narrator in an externally focused iterative process between themselves and contextual elements associated with religion – culture, values, and family – for example, Participants 5, 10 and 16. Another dynamic situated the individual narrator in the context of working with their reflective consciousness. Here the older individual re-visited and contemplated spiritual experiences along with other personally significant memories. A final dynamic arrangement occurred at the point of interaction between personal change as an outcome of reflection and external engagement with the individual narrator’s community. Such dynamic complexes appeared to be individually transformative at and across the points in the model.
5

The Biblical narrative of Abraham

5.1 Introduction to the three Biblical spiritual narratives

In Chapter 4 the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians were collected, documented and analysed. The thematic data obtained from the research provided direct information around the spiritual experiences of contemporary individuals situated in a Western cultural context. This contemporary spirituality was highly personal and rarely exposed to external view but it revealed a dynamic and richly layered phenomenon identified by the individual participants as their spiritual experiences and articulated by them through their spiritual narratives.

The aim of this chapter as well as the following Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 is to generate thematic data around the spiritual narratives of older Biblical protagonists - Abraham, Anna and Simeon, and Job. It is understood that these Biblical narratives serve as spiritual narratives in that they explore the relationship between the individual and their God. The study also investigates thematic connections around the “old age” of the characters and its interpretive potential. However, before the first narrative analysis associated with Abraham is undertaken, this introduction to the three Biblical narratives will commence with a brief review of (i) the theme of “old age” and (ii) the theme of “spirituality” are represented by contemporary scholarship.

Old age as a thematic focus of Biblical scholarship

In Chapter 2 I outlined how contemporary scholarship’s interest in old age in the Bible focused on a dichotomous relationship between old age as physical decline and old age as wisdom. I argued that this dichotomy created an important interpretive dynamic where the opportunities for ongoing human development were tested through the dangers of routine and personal ossification as the individual ages. There were, however, further interpretive vistas available to Biblical scholarship around ageing and old age. The central focus here was on the relationship of the older individual and their God – and hence their spirituality; and a small number of extended Biblical studies around ageing provided additional commentary with regard to the old person’s relationship with God (Painter 2001; Harris 2008). John
Painter (2001) provides an analysis around a Biblical perspective on old age. In his work ‘Outward decay and inward renewal: A Biblical perspective on ageing and the image of God’, his Biblical perspectives are limited to references to Paul. Painter explores old age and human spirituality within the Pauline dualism of the finite life of the flesh and the eternal life of the spirit where the individual human strives to attain their potential as an individual in the image of God (Painter 2001, p. 45). In this context, ageing and old age are problems of material existence, which can only be addressed by individually striving towards achieving one’s potential as the image of God – regardless of physical and mental decline; and by accepting through faith in the resurrection of Christ that one is also resurrected and transformed at death. Painter’s exegesis of old age and spirituality may be considered in a number ways here. Painter identifies a number of themes within the Pauline opus, which reference bodily frailty and which he extends to physical old age in a comprehensive manner not found within Paul’s writings. Nevertheless, if this extension is accepted, Painter identifies a number of old age themes, which may apply in in the following ways. Painter argues that Paul established a link between physical decay and ageing and the potential for a horizon-less future beyond a material death through (i) working with the transformative potential of humankind containing within itself the image of God; and (ii) working with the creedal commitment to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These themes identified by Paul find some support in the contemporary spiritual narratives within this study in that they evidence thematically the transformative aspect of the individuals’ spiritual experiences – atheist and Christian. There is no support within the contemporary spiritual narratives for creedal statements around Christ and resurrection. There are also a number of other issues arising from the contemporary spiritual narratives, which differ from Painter’s study of old age and spirituality. First, Painter’s insistence on a deficit image of old age – “decayed” – is not borne out by the generally rich and complex spiritual interior lives of the contemporary participants in my study, whose life orientation is in the present and not focused on death or suffering. Second, Painter refers to the Biblical God as if this entity were a known constant; yet it appears important to acknowledge that the Biblical God might be argued to be a variable phenomenon throughout the Scriptures.

J. Gordon Harris is a major scholar in the area of Biblical studies on old age. He presents the relationship between old age/older individuals and God as a means of revealing God positively at work in the human community. Harris argues that the relationship between God, old age, and the elderly signposts God’s role across a number of critical social needs: (i) through the blessing of old age, God held out the promise of a full and richly lived life; (ii)
God supported social organisations which honour and comfort older citizens; and (iii) God worked as the God of Justice and protector of the frail and old (Harris 2008, pp. 3–6). Once more, my study accepts and benefits from Harris’ observations around spirituality expressed in terms of community and moral relationships. As with Painter, Harris portrays the human individual–God relationship as characterised by the inequality between a frail, limited human and an omnipotent, omniscient, static Divinity. On this important point, in terms of arriving at a Biblical perspective on spirituality, neither the contemporary spiritual narratives nor my subsequent literary narrative analysis supports this portrayal. I would also argue to the contrary with Harris’ statement that the Bible “lacks a systematic theology of aging and a comprehensive account of the treatment of elders” (2008, p. 6). Similarly, I would argue to the contrary that with regard to old age and ageing, the lack of Biblical materials obliges the researcher to find their data and interpretive guide in anthropological and social materials appropriate to the Biblical era. The following text-based interpretations demonstrate that the Biblical narratives offer a sophisticated discussion around human spirituality and that old age and old individuals are central to this discussion.

**Spirituality as a thematic focus of Biblical scholarship**

In the same way that old age is thematically studied in the Bible, spirituality is also a thematic focus of some literary critical scholarship. Spirituality as a theme in current Biblical scholarship finds scholarly exposition in the work of the UK-based Australian academic, Stephen Barton. Barton’s *Spirituality of the Gospels* (2006) offers an exhaustive close thematic reading of the four Gospels and demonstrates that each of these Gospel narratives provides specific themes around a spirituality associated with the God-as-Jesus relationship. My study’s findings around contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives resonate with the thematic material which his detailed research provides.

The introduction to this chapter discussed the textual data around old age and spirituality generated by significant contemporary Biblical scholars working appropriately with the qualitative critical methodology of literary criticism. In this chapter and the following two chapters, a literary critical narrative reading of the Abraham, Anna and Simeon, and Job Biblical spiritual narratives is provided.
5.2 The Abraham narrative – a literary critical analysis

One of the contemporary spiritual narrators wrote “my spirituality is my relationship with God”. Abraham’s relationship with God also spoke to his spirituality and to the foundational nature of that spirituality. Abraham and his associated qualities and issues represented an important exploration of humankind’s spirituality and the insistence on Abraham’s old age in this context also is argued to hold interpretive significance for the discussion around spirituality.

The interpretive focus on narrative structures

The Abraham narrative is found in the *Book of Genesis*. It concerns the wanderings of a Chaldean named Abram and the conversations he had with his God. In the Abram/Abraham story I argue that the two overarching narrative structures of journey and dialogue are the major vehicles employed to explore humankind’s relationship with the Divine and therefore with humankind’s spirituality. However, unlike the Anna and Simeon, and Job narratives, the Abraham narrative in its entirety is an extended and complex narrative that contains within it many sub-plots, with associated symbolically-laden characters and events. This overall narrative complexity is itself a narrative device that forces the reader or listener to return to events and images and reinterpret approaches and meaning. In essence, the reader or listener is required to engage with the narrative as a vehicle for their own interpretive wandering and dialogue with God.

The complexity of the Abraham material had implications for the interpretive approaches for my literary critical analysis. The point of interpretive engagement that I chose focused on the major structural narrative devices of Abraham’s dialogues with his God and with Abraham’s wanderings. This decision would allow overarching narrative patterns around the hero archetype and journeying to be analysed. In a similar way, the focus on the Abraham–God dialogues argues that the structural centrality of the dialogues directs the reader or listener to the centrality of the God–human individual relationship in terms of human spirituality. Moreover, the narrative focus on the God–Abraham dialogues provides a structural connection to God’s previous dialogue partners in *Genesis* and suggests the interpretive significance of these previous dialogues in terms of a developing human spirituality.
This narrative complexity of the Abraham passages nonetheless obscures potential thematic linkages within the textual material. For example, the episode where Abraham finally openly declares that Sarah is both his wife and his sister (Genesis 20:11) links back to the opening passages of the Abraham narrative in which Terah’s family members are presented (Genesis 11:26–32) but in which the incestuous nature of these family relationships and several others is concealed. This was interpretively significant for my analysis with regard to human spirituality because brother–sister incest is a symbolic mythic marker for a Divine relationship and for a fully gendered Divinity. My analysis of the incest theme is provided in the following discussion but I reference it here to illustrate how structural and narrative complexity in the Abraham narrative made it at times difficult to establish where motifs and symbolically laden material were contributing to the exploration of human spirituality. A different point of engagement with the Abrahamic textual material could have been taken by focusing on discrete motifs or images instead of focusing on the overarching narrative structures. However, this approach would lose the impact of the major narrative structures in conveying interpretive content and meaning which remains central to the discussion of human spirituality in the Abraham narrative and in the following narratives associated with Job and Anna and Simeon. In order therefore to facilitate the identification of thematic material around human spirituality conveyed both by major narrative structures and by motifs and other symbolic representations, Table 5.1, Guide to key thematic material in the Abraham narrative and its interpreted relationship with spirituality, located at the end of this chapter, was developed. Table 5.1 offers a summary guide which links narrative, motifs and other symbolic features interpreted in my literary critical analysis of the Abraham narrative with thematic data associated with human spirituality.

5.3 Major narrative structure: Abraham’s wanderings and the hero archetype

This study now focuses on the major narrative structures of the Abrahamic textual material – namely major structures established by Abraham’s wanderings and by his dialogues with God. First, the narrative structure developed through Abraham’s wandering is considered. The wandering structure is broken into three sections. These are:

1. The pre-wandering passages (Gen 11:27 to Gen 12:4).
2. The wandering and interwoven dialogues with God passages (Gen 12:5 to Gen 22:19).
3. The post wandering period and the deaths of Sarah and Abraham passages (Gen 22:20 to Gen 25:11).

This narrative structure presents as a simple construction but within each of the three wandering periods many sub-plots and motifs are developed. In addition, thematic and symbolic relationships that link across wandering periods add further complexity to the narrative. On considering this first central narrative structure, it is argued that it follows a hero archetype pattern; and Abraham’s association with this archetype is commonly referenced (e.g. Sherman 2015, pp.33-34) but seldom developed in detail.

**Abraham and the hero archetype**

The wandering or journey motif of the hero is one of the most common cultural patterns or archetypes (Campbell 1949). As a motif, it was associated with the young fertility god-heroes who bring renewal to the land and transformation to the kingdom. The hero archetype itself was not a new idea in terms of literary or creative effort from a range of fields and it has been explored in the works of Frazer (1963) and Jung (1967). It is argued that Abraham followed the hero’s quest or archetype but in his own old hero way. The following summary captures the most common elements of the hero archetype particularly in terms of the hero’s journey or quest:

1. The hero has a mysterious or divine birth or heritage.
2. The hero is called to adventure or to a quest.
3. The hero enters a new and more dangerous world.
4. The hero meets the challenge of a number of trials or tests often involving encounters with aspects of the Feminine.
5. The hero confronts the “great trial”.
6. The hero reinstates order to the kingdom and ensures the fertility of the land.

Abraham can broadly be argued to reflect these hero elements in the following basic ways:

1. Abraham’s family relationships are a puzzle.
2. Abraham leaves Haran on the command of God.
3. Abraham wanders as an alien in many lands: Canaan, Egypt, the Hittite kingdom following God’s promise.
4. Aided by God, Abraham overcomes certain tests such as the confrontation with Pharaoh in Egypt, the rescue of Lot, and meeting the challenge of Abimalech through acknowledging Sarah as his wife and sister.

5. Abraham meets the challenge of his great trial establishing the line of inheritance.

6. Abraham secures the right bride for Isaac and hence the line of inheritance, and dies rich and very old.

Abraham’s wanderings and the identified hero archetype will now be discussed in terms of the hero archetype elements which occur over the three narrative sections – namely, Gen 11:27 to Gen 12:4; Gen 12:5 to Gen 22:19; and Gen 22:20 to Gen 25:11.

The puzzle of Abraham’s family relations: The pre-wandering passages of the Abraham narrative (Gen 11:27 to Gen 12:4)

The pre-wandering passages of the Abraham narrative in the Book of Genesis offered textual material around the reasons for the “call” of Abraham by God and for his choice as the foundational figure for the Old and New Testament Scriptures. These introductory or pre-wandering passages of the narrative are found at Genesis 11:27 to Genesis 12:4 and focus on relational arrangements around Abraham and the Terah family group. It is these relationships which, when interpreted using mythic-symbolic terms, reveal why Abraham was special; why he was called by God; and why this call motif is significant in terms of the archetypal hero pattern where the Divinity calls the hero to undertake a quest.

Terah’s family: other claimants to God’s call and the covenantal relationship

At the beginning of the Abraham narrative in Genesis it is not clear as to why Abraham is the one chosen by God to establish a covenantal relationship. In fact there are other potential claimants for this role within the Terah family group. It was Terah, Abraham’s father, and not Abraham himself who was the first to move out of the archaic world of Ur and start wandering. Terah had three sons: Abraham, Nahor and Haran, and a daughter Sarah. There is no clear indication as to who stood to inherit the initiative Terah commenced. Terah’s son Haran died in Ur before the departure. Given that his father later left Ur and settled in a location named Haran, it is possible that this son was Terah’s choice for heir. Haran did not have a named wife or partner but he did have a son Lot who appeared to have significant possessions – again, presumably inherited from his father and grandfather. A second son of Terah – Nahor - travelled with Terah, Abraham and Lot to Haran. Nahor did not travel further
Nahor took his brother’s daughter, Milcah, as his named wife; and had eight sons by her – one of whom was Bethuel who later appears in the narrative as Rebekah’s father. Nahor also had three sons and a daughter, Maacah, by his named concubine Reumah. Nahor as we later learn from the religious practices of his son Laban had kept the old household gods – amongst whom Yaweh was likely to be found (Gen 31:19-21). This assumption is based on Laban’s acknowledgment and acceptance of the Lord as “God” in the episode where he searches for his stolen house gods in Jacob’s luggage. Abraham was a third son of Terah. Abraham had a named wife who was also-his half-sister, Sarah. The following question therefore was posed at the introduction to the narrative. What exactly were the qualities revealed throughout the narrative, which suggested that Abraham was the chosen one in terms of becoming God’s dialogue partner and establishing God’s kingdom and inheritance?

**Abraham’s mysterious birth and divine marriage**

Abraham’s birth and family circumstances are mysterious and hint at divine connections. There is some suggestion of a royal connection in the name of his wife Sarah, which means “princess”. However, Abraham’s family relationships suggest further royal, even mythic, associations. This comes about through the symbolism associated with the incestuous nature of the Terah family group. If the Terah – Abraham generational line is considered, the following genealogical relationship emerges.

![The Terah Family](image)
This means:

1. Although the mothers of Sarah, Nahor and Haran are unknown, it is known that Sarah and Abraham do not share the same mother (Genesis 20:12). This means that Abraham and Sarah are half brother and sister and husband and wife.

2. Nahor and Milcah are uncle and niece and husband and wife.

The family incest pattern was found in the royal house of Pharaoh in Egypt and mimics the divine pairing of Isis and Osiris. The sexual pairing of a divine brother and sister is a mythic patterning known as heiros gamos (Jung 1967, p. 463; Encyclopaedia Brittanica n.d.) The mythic pairing points to a religious sexual union aimed at keeping the land fertile and the community protected. The occurrence of mythic incest as a theme in the Terah - Abraham line occurs throughout the Abraham narrative and this discussion comments upon it later with regard to the Lot and Rebekah sub-narratives.

At this point in the analysis the critical thing to observe is the “hidden” nature of the information dealing with the “Terah” group incest arrangements. It is located in small points of information throughout the narrative and the reader has to return and re-read a number of passages before the incest motif is revealed. There are a number of ways to interpret the undisclosed nature of the incest motif and the mystery of Abraham’s birth and subsequent relationships. First: the reader understands the incest arrangements as a puzzle, which has to be solved in order to see the power and potential of the divine Abraham lineage. Second: the reader recognises the incest arrangements as a marker for the line of true inheritance. Third: the hidden incest arrangements acknowledge that the ancient fertility arrangements they represent are losing power and becoming inaccessible.

As indicated by the genealogical chart in Figure 5.1 it is true that the features of Abraham’s birthright were also shared by his siblings. The difference was that Abraham was likely to have had a different mother to the other two brothers – and certainly different to Sarah as the reader is told at Genesis 20:12. It is suggested here that it was through a different kind of relationship to the Feminine that Abraham laid claim to the chosen role. A further indication that the Abraham–Sarah line was to be held distinct from the Nahor–Milcah line was in God’s renaming of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17:5, Gen 17:15). The effect of this renaming was to create a genealogical boundary between the two groups.
Abraham and Sarah were to represent a different way to express a divine nature and a new line of inheritance.

A further way Abraham was distinguished from his divine family group was once more through Sarah. Abraham and his brother Nahor both stood in a unique relationship to the Feminine as they were the first males to have named wives since Lamach of the Cain line (Gen 4:17). This link to the Cain line proves later to be important in determining how the dialogues work in the Abraham narrative.

Both Abraham and Nahor were in incestuous relationships with these named wives. Abraham’s relationship with Sarah, however, claimed the greater prominence on a number of points. First, Sarah was of a royal line, as her name means princess. Second, Abraham and Sarah’s sister-brother pairing is a more direct relationship than the uncle-niece relationship of Nahor and Milcah. In this they also stood in the line of mythological divine brother-sister pairing such as Zeus-Hera and Osiris-Isis. Finally Abraham-Sarah are given precedence over Nahor- Milcah in the genealogical introduction (Gen 11:27). The Abraham-Sarah pairing therefore represented another insight into why Abraham is special and so chosen to engage with God as dialogue partner. It is also the case that Abraham and his heirs would return to the original mythological and divine Terah group for partners.

Abraham’s wanderings (Gen 12:5 to Gen 22:19) and the hero archetype

The pre-wandering thematic material around inheritance lines, divine incest and right relationship with the Feminine all argue for Abraham being the one chosen for renewed dialogue with God. The problem was that the Divine Female, Sarah, was barren; and this can be interpreted as meaning that human spirituality had not been quickened. Sarah was both a key reason Abraham was called by God as the chosen dialogue partner and the reason Abraham was open to dialogue with a God who promised to make Sarah, as Divine Female, fertile and to give Abraham heirs in his old age – “Go from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation” (Gen 12:1-2). Abraham’s heroic wandering was now driven by his direct experiences with a God who promised the miracle of renewed fertility.

Abraham’s wanderings and his conversations with God now formed the central passages of the narrative. The introductory passage or pre-wandering passages show that Abraham met the initial characteristics of the hero. It is now apparent that Abraham broadly follows a
“hero” pattern and so links his narrative to concerns around individual/community transformation and fertility. Certainly, his birth and divine call captures the hero motif at this point. However, the characteristics around the wandering period are now further interrogated for their hero qualities and how these reflect on Abraham as an archetypal hero.

In pursuit of God’s promises, Abraham wanders, not having any land of his own, and makes the following journeys and associated camps. He travels:

- from Haran to Shechem in Canaan next to the oak of Moreh – and builds an altar
- to Egypt via the Negeb because of famine
- from Egypt via Negeb to Bethel after his dispute with the Pharaoh over Sarah; he pitches his tent between Bethel and Ai
- to Hebron where he again moves his tent and builds an altar after he separates from Lot
- from Canaan and travels as far as Hobah north of Damascus in order to rescue Lot
- to Shaveh near Hebron to receive blessings from Melchizedek
- no location: Abraham’s dream detailing God’s demand for sacrifice
- no location: Hagar-Ishmael incident in which Hagar finds refuge at Kadesh-Bered
- no location: God’s demand for the circumcision of the males in Abraham’s group and God’s demand for establishing the covenant
- no change to location: Hebron – oaks of Mamre: God’s visit to Abraham and Sarah with the promise of a son
- towards Sodom from Hebron as Abraham attempts to bargain with God
- Sodom episode
- from Hebron via Negeb to Gerar, where Abraham must acknowledge Sarah as his sister and wife
- no location: birth of Isaac is assumed to take place in Hebron where promise was made
- no location: assumed it is Hebron from where Hagar and Ishmael are cast out
- to Beer-sheba to establish a commercial covenant with Abimalech over water rights
  - from Beer-sheba, where Abraham now lives, to Morah, which is a three-day journey, in order to sacrifice Isaac.
There is a brief post-wandering period, which occurs after the sacrifice of Isaac episode and the death of Sarah (Gen 22:20 to Gen 25:11). The elements of this period are:

- the death of Sarah in Hebron
- Abraham ceases wandering; he will not travel to Haran, instead he sends his servant
- Abraham marries Keturah and their sons are sent eastward
- Abraham dies and is buried, facing Hebron, with Sarah.

Although Abraham wanders in the lands to which God directs him, it is apparent in the wandering narrative structures that Abraham’s quest is different from the goal-directed behaviour and muscular adventures of classic young heroes such as Odysseus. Abraham’s acts and qualities as revealed throughout the narrative are suggestive of a personal, almost domestic, context. Once Canaan is reached, Abraham’s trips lack any consistent goal-directed movement. There is a famine, he packs up his tent and travels to Egypt; he has conflict with Pharaoh, he packs up his tent and returns to Hebron; and so it continues. Abraham is reactive to his environment. He responds to God or to events as they happen. His behaviour is not driven by journeying to a particular place or addressing an overwhelming danger, and while Abraham undertakes a couple of major journeys including to and from Egypt, to and from Hobah north of Damascus and the three-day journey to and from Mt
Morah in order to sacrifice Isaac, most of his wanderings are local. Towards the end of the narrative, Abraham does not undertake the journey back to Haran to secure the line of inheritance for Isaac. Instead, he sends his trusted, old servant. It is argued that Abraham works differently within the hero archetype. This circumstance is driven by the fact that Abraham’s hero activity is to be found in his dialogues with his God rather than physical hero challenges. This narrative focus is interpreted to mean that Abraham as a hero met the challenges of human spirituality rather than challenges around material world fertility.

5.4 Major narrative structure: Abraham’s dialogues with God

The second major narrative structure that my study interpretively analysed is that arising from Abraham’s dialogues with God. Abraham’s significance in terms of the maturation of humankind’s spirituality is underscored by the extensive and extended nature of his dialogues with God. This is the first time in Genesis that the humankind–God dialogue is so expansively reported. There are, however, other Genesis dialogue partners with God prior to Abraham. These are Adam and Eve, and Cain and Noah. Structurally and narratively within Genesis, the earlier God–human partner dialogues are linked to the Abraham narrative. The content and style of these pre-Abraham conversations sets the scene for issues in the Abraham–God dialogues. These pre-Abraham dialogues represent two different ways of engaging with God. One way, represented by Adam, Eve and Noah, places control of the dialogue entirely with God and the exchanges between human and God are on a command and obey basis. The other way, represented by Cain, shows the dialogue relationship to be conducted in a much more thoughtful and sophisticated manner. Cain is shown using his human capacity for reflecting consciousness to engage God as a dialogue partner in difficult and complex exchanges. These important pre-Abraham dialogue partners are examined in the context of setting the scene for the Abraham narrative.

The pre-Abraham dialogue partners

The Adam–Eve dialogue

This first dialogue takes place after the Fall, and man and woman now possess the capacity to know good and evil. The dialogue between God and Adam and Eve shows God to be in control. God asks:

- Where are you?
- Who told you that you were naked?
Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?
What is this you have done?

God’s questions are those of a judge. In fact, God knows the answer to the questions that are asked. At the end of the questioning, judgement and punishment are delivered which in part consist of denying Adam and Eve divine-like immortality. Humankind will die and they will return to the earth. This is a simple command and judgement dialogue, where Adam and Eve are powerless respondents to the demanding God. The Cain dialogues are a different matter in terms of complexity and challenge to God.

**The Cain dialogues**

God’s next Genesis dialogue partner is Cain. There are two conversation sets between God and Cain. In the first conversation, God challenges Cain over Cain’s sullen reaction to Abel’s animal sacrifice offering being preferred over his offering of harvest goods. God asks of the non-responding Cain:

- Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?
- If you do well, will you not be accepted?

Through these questions, we see that God expects Cain to have a moral framework, to know the values or situations that engender anger in him. God’s questions further challenge Cain to work with the value judgement concepts of “doing well” and “acceptable”. Given that his parents lacked the knowledge to clothe themselves, it is unsurprising that Cain lacks the sophisticated knowledge to argue a moral position with God. God’s final summarising of Cain’s situation again works with concepts beyond the reach of the newly created human: “And if you do not well, sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4:6–7). God might well have known what is meant by this abstract framework, but Cain simply lacks moral knowledge at this stage to have taken meaning from the experience and particularly to unpack what “sin” might entail.

Cain’s next act, of course is to kill Abel. In fact, Cain “rises up against Abel”, which might suggest a revolt by Cain against Abel’s actions and values in shedding blood in his animal sacrifice to God. In the conversations that follow the killing of Abel, God is shown as a divinity taken outside its comfort zone of command and judgement. The first thing to note in the aftermath of Abel’s killing is that God appears not to be in control of the situation, in
comparison to the earlier Adam–Eve dialogue. Most critically, in this dialogue, Cain both responds to questions and then questions God. As the dialogue moves to its conclusion, where Cain laments his fate, the reader encounters Cain as an increasingly sophisticated dialogue partner. In the narrative space of these dialogues, Cain has moved from non-responder, to questioner, to emotional sophisticate and analyst. The space occupied by this sophisticated dialogue between Cain and God is characterised by moral perspectives and responses. It could be argued that these spare but complex Cain dialogues crack open one of the critical and confronting issues of human spirituality. This is the issue of how humankind is to engage with God as a co-creator of the moral universe.

The Noah dialogue

The period between Cain and Noah as dialogue partners is populated with long genealogical lists of breeding males who produce many named sons and unnamed daughters. The nuanced dialogue of Cain with God is interrupted and the next dialogue partner is Noah. In the dialogue between Noah and God, God returns to the command and direction style of the earlier Adam and Eve and first Cain dialogues. Noah is given directions on how to build the ark, how to fill the ark with creatures, and how to re-populate the earth. God issues commands about the shedding of blood and retribution and dictates the terms of the first covenant. In this dialogue, Noah is not in conversation with God, rather – like Adam and Eve – he is the passive receiver of God’s words.

The Abraham–God dialogues

These earlier dialogue partners for God therefore establish a critical tension for entree into the Abraham dialogues. The dialogue dynamic evident up until the Abraham narrative is either the command-direct-judge style of Adam, Eve and Noah or the complex interrogative-analysis style of Cain. The conversations that unfold over the passages of Abraham’s wandering period reveal that it is the style of the interrupted Cain narratives, which again achieve prominence. Not only is the complex Cain-style dialogue reinstated it is further developed throughout these interactive Abraham–God dialogues. In these various dialogues, the reader sees in Abraham a range of emotions, issues and challenges that attest to Abraham’s spiritual strength and developing maturity. It is in meeting God in this ongoing challenge of spiritual dialogue that Abraham demonstrates his credentials as a hero. The challenges Abraham meets as old Abraham are spiritual ones of divine dialogue rather than those of the young hero who slays dragons.
Abraham and God dialogue over nine extended narrative episodes that represent almost all of Abraham’s life from 75 years old onwards. In these dialogue episodes, God not only speaks to Abraham, at times he directly appears in episodes that capture the sensate quality of the dialogue moment. God appears to Abraham at the oaks of Moreh (Genesis 12:6); comes in a night time vision (Genesis 15); appears to Abraham telling him to walk before him and establishing circumcision as a covenantal sign (Genesis 17); appears by the oaks of Mamre in the form of an angel/man (Genesis 18) with the promise of the inheritance; and, through an angel, negotiates the events around the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22). The breakthrough nature of Abraham’s God moments provides thematic evidence of Abraham’s direct experience of God and of the unambiguous sensate quality of the breakthrough phenomenon.

One further feature of the initial Abraham–God dialogues which contains high spiritual value for humankind is the notion of the “call”. Abraham is called by God to wander and to establish the line of inheritance. The direct “call” from God to engage in personal spirituality and action is a theme that comes from Abraham through Paul to many contemporary individuals. These “calls” or “God moments” are found in the contemporary spiritual narratives (Narrators 12 and 17); and they are also evident in contemporary qualitative narrative studies that focus on the spiritual experiences of vowed women and religiously committed men (Marcoccia 2014; Smith 2001).

The extended communications between God and Abraham have the tone of bargaining and commercial transactions of which the covenants are the most obvious example. In his talks with God, Abraham displays an important characteristic, which is aligned to his bargaining nature. He is prepared to contend with God. It is a continuation of the interrupted Cain dialogues and a characteristic that he shares with other critical figures in the Scriptures such as Jacob, Moses and Job. He is prepared to bargain about questions of morality and ethics. For example, after hearing that God is about to completely destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham challenges: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” (Gen 18:23). For all his other ordinary “hero” characteristics, this preparedness to challenge God was a Promethean engine, driving a powerful spirituality. Lawrence Kant (2003, p. 79) makes this observation about Abraham’s relationship with his God and in fact draws the equally important conclusion that this contending relationship is a consistent characteristic of the Abrahamic line and God.
**The content of the Abraham–God dialogues**

As well as the attitudinal dynamic at work in the God–Abraham dialogues, there are the key issues addressed by their dialogues. These issues are: (i) Abraham’s need for an heir with a legitimate line of inheritance; and (ii) his relationship with Sarah as the Divine Female.

**Abraham and the line of inheritance**

Abraham’s need for an heir and an inheritance to leave him is both the central driver of narrative action and Abraham’s great “hero” test. The way the Abrahamic heir and inheritance were understood and interpreted sits at the heart of an important discussion around humankind’s spirituality. Was the Abrahamic hero the one who made the land fertile? Or was he the hero who opened up the potential of humankind’s spirituality? Some modern commentary suggests he was the latter (Cathedral of St Phillip 2011). Moreover, Abraham’s insistence on a line of inheritance achieves something important in terms of humankind’s spiritual experience. It symbolically suggests a future horizon. Just as the genealogies allowed humankind to override temporal limitation in terms of time past, the spiritual inheritance symbolised by Abraham’s need for an heir offered the potential to extend into time future.

Abraham’s heroic great test then was to solve the problem of not having a legitimate heir and a land inheritance to pass on to his heir. In attempting to reach his particular hero goal:

- he entered into a covenantal agreement with God which involved Abraham getting his heir and God getting his people: “I will be their God”
- he took up a journey away from the old life of Ur-Haran which was initiated by his father Terah, and spent years wandering around Canaan without having ownership rights over any land
- he built several altars and responded to unusual sacrificial arrangements
- he subjected himself and all the males of his large household to adult circumcision, which, as revealed in the Jacob–Shechem episode, was painful and debilitating.

Yet in spite of all his efforts and pleadings to God, Abraham remained without a legitimate child from his wife, Sarah. It was not however the case that Abraham lacked options with regard to heirs. Abraham’s heirs could have been:

- Lot – his brother Haran’s son
- Eliezer of Damascus – “a slave born in my house”
- Ishmael – Abraham’s son by the slave girl Hagar who was Sarah’s surrogate.

**Lot:** The relationship between Abraham and Lot is largely an unexplored one in the narrative. Given that Lot formed part of the group which continued Terah’s journey away from Ur, he might have had some claim with regard the inheritance of a new land. It seems, however, that Abraham’s connection with his nephew was tenuous at best and was framed around Lot’s possessions. It was Lot and his possessions that Abraham brought along on the journey, and it was Lot and his possessions that Abraham rescued from the marauding kings. Moreover, Lot and Abraham quarrelled over territory, which resulted in a split in the initial journeying group. The reader is left to ask: what was the issue with Lot, which prevented him from becoming Abraham’s heir?

One suggestion in terms of Lot’s ineligibility to be heir is found in Lot’s relationship with women. Lot had a wife and daughters, all unnamed and so suggesting a poorly developed connection with the female principle. But Lot’s connection here moved from poorly developed to destructive, when he offered his virgin daughters to the violent and sexually assaulting mob in place of his male visitors (Gen 19:4–11). This destructive motif continues throughout the rest of Genesis 19. Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt and Lot’s daughters got him drunk and then engaged in incestuous sex with their effectively unconscious father in order to bear children and continue the bloodline. Lot’s relationship with the Feminine was at the most basic and undifferentiated level and it was this that likely precluded him from being Abraham’s heir.

**Eliezer of Damascus:** Eliezer of Damascus stood as Abraham’s heir over Lot. Eliezer’s status is unclear. He was a “slave born in my house” but apparently not of Abraham’s “very own issue” (Gen 15:2–5). How such an individual came to be Abraham’s heir is unknown. However, it is clear that the necessary pairing between Abraham and a wife from the divine line had not taken place. Once more, the line of inheritance was dependent upon the right relationship with the divine Female.

**Ishmael:** Abraham’s son by the surrogate Sarah, Hagar the Egyptian slave girl, appears to have been Abraham’s preferred heir. This was even after the birth of Isaac. At the time of the covenant and the circumcision discussion between Abraham and God, Abraham uniquely pleaded: “O that Ishmael may live in your sight!” (Gen 17:18). When he was forced to send
Hagar and Ishmael to their likely deaths in the desert, the reader is shown Abraham’s distress, and tenderness towards Hagar: “The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son ... so Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder ...” (Gen 21:11–14). This episode stands in stark contrast to the chilling way in which Abraham met God’s command to sacrifice Isaac where, for example, he required his son to carry the wood for his own sacrificial fire for three days to the proposed site of the deed. Yet Ishmael was not to be Abraham’s heir, even though this was clearly Abraham’s preference. God continued to state that Sarah would bear Abraham a son who would be the heir of the promise.

Sarah and the line of inheritance – the hero and the Divine Female

The question remains as to why God insisted on Sarah as the mother of the heir of the inheritance bloodline. It seems that there were a number of elements at work here. First: Sarah was a link to the Divine Female, as suggested by the incest motif around the Terah family grouping. It was only after Abraham publically acknowledged that Sarah was both his sister and his wife at Genesis 20, that the conception and birth of the heir Isaac took place. Sarah’s “immortal” heritage was also found in her ageless beauty and the fact that she was finally able to bear a child in her “old” age. The child Isaac was more a child of Sarah and God because it was only through God’s agency that the miracle of Isaac’s birth occurred.

Second: Sarah was able to contend with God – as was shown in the episode where she laughed at God:

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying “After I have grown old and my husband is old shall I have pleasure? ... But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”: for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.” (Gen 18:12–15)

Abraham is the only other individual in the scriptures who laughs at God (Gen 17:15–18) but his laughter goes unrecognised by God. This suggests Sarah was almost divinely powerful and was perhaps the source of those in the inheritance line who contended with God, such as Jacob.

Third: Sarah occasioned the opportunity for Abraham to finally call some piece of territory his own: this was through the purchase from the Hittites of burial land for Sarah. Even though his wandering had made Abraham wealthy, he “owned” no land or kingdom except for this plot of land for “his dead”.  

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Fourth: It was to the females of his and Sarah’s line that Abraham, by proxy of his old servant, sent for a wife for his son Isaac. Rebekah was the granddaughter of their brother Nahor’s incestuous marriage to his niece, Milcah. Her father Bethuel was a son of this relationship. The incest motif finds even stronger expression in that it is likely that Rebekah’s mother was also her sister and that Bethuel was both her father and grandfather. In Genesis 24:52–54, the passage initially had the girl’s brother Laban and her mother receiving gifts and later asking for Rebekah to remain a while with them. But as the episode developed, the reference was to the girl’s sister (Gen 24:59, Gen 24:60). This hint is made even more likely by Rebekah having her nurse go with her (Gen 24:59) because the sister who was also the mother was herself likely to have been too young to care for her child. The child’s nurse would then have assumed a special place with Rebekah.

Abraham’s right relationship with his God therefore was inextricably linked to his right relationship with the divine Female. While Abraham was eventually able to establish this right relationship and obtain his heir and the inheritance, there were difficulties in the Abraham–Sarah relationship. These difficulties indicate areas of concern for Abraham as a spiritual hero. They are found in the following circumstances: (i) until Abraham appropriately acknowledged Sarah as sister and wife, he effectively prostituted her with Pharaoh and Abimalech for both personal safety and gain; (ii) Sarah herself was revealed as distant and cruel in the episodes relating to Hagar and Ishmael, she was hardly the nurturing goddess type; (iii) Sarah and Abraham appear finally not to have dwelt in the same place: Abraham at the time of the Isaac sacrifice incident lived at Beer-sheba (Gen 22:19), while at Sarah’s next mention – her death – she was in Hebron (Gen 23:2); (iv) after Sarah’s death Abraham married Keturah and had six sons; and (v) Sarah appears to have cut Abraham off from a balanced relationship with their son, Isaac. It was Sarah who made all the final decisions about the heir Isaac and the inheritance. Any objections held by Abraham are overruled by God. It was to Sarah’s tent that Isaac brought his bride: “So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen 24:67).

5.5 The last dialogue and the post-wandering period

The last dialogue between Abraham and God occurred around the sacrifice of Isaac. This troubling episode is a climax within the Abraham narratives and is seen as a test of Abraham by God. One way of interpreting the test is to view it as a test of Abraham’s faith in and obedience to God. In this interpretation, Abraham passed his test. The other way to interpret
the test is as a failure by Abraham because he did not refuse God’s call to sacrifice Isaac. I agree with this latter interpretation that Abraham finally failed God’s test. His failure was situated in his retreat from that bargaining contentious characteristic which challenged God around moral issues. When Abraham was silent in this matter about the sacrifice of his heir and inheritance he failed as a dialogue partner. After the sacrifice of Isaac event Sarah died and Abraham ceased to wander. He lost direct contact with the inheritance bloodline of the Terah group, he married a second wife and had six sons, and he died a rich man but without any land except for the plot he purchased for Sarah’s burial.

Within the context of the overall narrative, however, Abraham succeeded as the hero whose quest to obtain an heir and establish a line of inheritance was achieved. His quest is characterised by a personal, almost domestic, quality. Such a personal tone to the Abrahamic hero actually fits well with his foundational achievement because Abraham has established a personal, direct and ongoing relationship with his One God. It is also apparent from the narrative that this God relationship is very much a work-in-progress. Developing an appropriate relationship with the Divine Female, for example, is one area highlighted as troublesome.

5.6 **Why is Abraham “old”?**

The Abraham narrative uses the hero quest and the interwoven dialogues to explore:

- a transformative experience on the individual and personal level. Interpretation of the narrative suggests that personal growth is sourced in a direct relationship with God the Divine
- the need to integrate issues around the Feminine principle into the God dialogue
- the potential for the personal transformative God experience to energise more broadly into the human community and to open up a future world of opportunity and growth.

Within this overall context of spiritual transformation, Abraham’s old age becomes an issue at the following narrative points: (i) Abraham’s age when he had his first call from God: he was 75; (ii) Abraham’s departure from Haran and his wandering: Abraham was 75 when he commenced his wandering; and (iii) Abraham and Sarah’s ages when they conceived Isaac and when Sarah bore him. Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100.
The call and conversation with God

Abraham stands as an image for the individual’s engagement with their spiritual nature and its development. A number of issues are suggested by Abraham’s old man image. As Maslow (2013) suggests in his important psychological study on the hierarchy of needs, concerns around physical needs such as food and shelter had to be addressed before humans moved to consider spiritual or life-meaning issues. These basic physical survival needs would have been the focus of “young” Abraham. He was, however, as “old” Abraham, ready to develop his spiritual nature and fertility. This circumstance allowed Abraham to present as the spiritual hero, as distinct from the fertility hero of environments where the physical needs of the human community had to be met.

The fact that Abraham first heard God’s call in old age also suggests something about the quality of humankind’s consciousness. Over time we all collect memories and old age is typically a time to reflect on those memories (Jung 1967). It is the time in human experience where we most commonly engage our reflecting consciousness. It is this quality of human consciousness that calls up issues around the meaning of our lives and so drives our spiritual growth and our conversation with God.

Abraham’s wandering in old age

Abraham was an old man when he commenced his wandering. His wandering is characterised by having no particular end point. Unlike the “young” hero whose goals are well known in terms of renewal of the land and the community, Abraham wandered through the landscape without goals. His actions were comprised of responding to his conversations with God. It would seem then that the journeying was in fact the actual point of the experience. Abraham’s age is a marker to the spiritual journey where responding in terms of the individual’s dialogue with the Divine refers to a spiritual maturity.

An aligned characteristic of Abraham’s wandering is found in the lack of external direction shaping his journey. Apart from God’s calls, no other agent had control over Abraham’s travels. This reinforces the personal and individual nature of Abraham’s spiritual development. His relationship with God was an unmediated one. There is of course the issue of the priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek, who appeared in the company of the doomed King of Sodom; and who apparently was the priest of “God Most High” (Gen 14:18–20). Abraham kept his relationship with this priest on a strictly commercial basis, handing over one-tenth of the spoils to him; and there were no further dealings between the two characters. This
circumstance points again to the unmediated nature of Abraham’s relationship with the Divine.

**The birth of the heir and the inheritance**

The stand-out issue in terms of Abraham being an old man concerns the conception and birth of Isaac. As outlined earlier, both Abraham and Sarah were very old when Isaac was conceived and born. Much narrative effort is expended in drawing attention to this fact. Old age here signals the agency of the divine to produce the “miracle child”. The birth of the divine child is a common mythic motif that occurs again throughout these Scriptures. In fact, Abraham and Sarah’s age is a marker that the reader is in the territory of myth and needs to interpret the environment symbolically. In the context of Abraham’s old age, Isaac is the renewed spiritual “Self” and his inheritance is the kingdom of the spirit.

Why is Abraham old? Abraham is old because old age and the older person may act at times in the Scriptures to signal issues around human spirituality. As the spiritual hero, the character of “old” Abraham allows the reader to reflect on such issues as the need to address our spiritual nature and its potential to mature beyond any constraining horizon of physical decline.

**5.7 Summary: Framework considerations arising from the Abraham narrative**

In terms of this study’s Framework of Spirituality, the insights provided by a literary critical interpretation of the narrative structures found in the Genesis Abraham material may be summarised as follows:

- Spiritual engagement is above all else a personal and individual activity.
- The role of mediation between an individual and the divine is culturally powerful, as caught in the image of the priest–king. However, it entails dangers to which the individual must be alert, as suggested in Melchizedek’s proximity to the King of Sodom.
- Addressing the need for female spirituality to be captured in the Godhead is critical for achieving spiritual growth and maturity.
- The spiritual journey is its own goal and one that has no end point or limiting horizon.
- The “old” individual’s memories and reflecting consciousness are engines for spiritual engagement and development.

These issues are reflected in the Framework of Spirituality and further reported in Chapter 8. Table 5.1 summarises the specific thematic elements that were interpreted to provide insights around spirituality.
Table 5.1
Guide to key thematic material in the Abraham narrative and its interpreted relationship with spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abraham narrative</th>
<th>Location in the Abraham narrative (chapter section or Bible reference)</th>
<th>Implication for human spirituality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **MOTIF/THEME: Epiphany** | Section 5.4, Section 5.4 | Types of spiritual experiences  
- The sensate immediate presence of the Divine |
| - God heard (the 9 dialogues) | | |
| - God seen in vision | | |
| - God seen as angel | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: “Call” or “God moment”** | Section 5.4, Genesis 12: 1-9, Genesis 14:17-24 | “God moments” as personal spiritual breakthrough phenomena  
- The “call” to direct personal relationship with God  
- Unmediated relationship with God (no priest, guru) |
| - Abraham’s “God moments” (see above) | | |
| - God “calls” Abraham to engage with God and to commit to relationship with God which is to be expressed in actions  
- God–Abraham relationship is unmediated – there is no role for Melchizedek | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: Personal change/growth** | Genesis 12: 8-9, Genesis 17 | Personal adjustments as outcome of the God experience |
| Covenant (worship)/Covenant (circumcision) | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: development of moral creation** | Section 5.4, Genesis 18:22 | Morality and ethical positions developed and linked to spirituality |
| Link to the Cain dialogue  
Contesting with God over fate of righteous in Sodom episode | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: external focus on community** | Rescue of Lot episode (Gen 14)  
Meeting with the King of Sodom and Melchizedek episode (Gen 14)  
Genesis 21:11  
Genesis 6; 17 | Care for others and similar externally focused acts  
Creation of the Abrahamic community/nation |
| Abraham’s concern for Lot  
Abraham’s concern for the share portions of Mamre, Eschcol, Aner  
Abraham’s concern for Hagar and Ishmael  
Establishment of the community/nation | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: the shadow Divinity** | Genesis 18:22–33, Genesis 21:8–10 | Potential for negative outcomes associated with spirituality |
| God’s indiscriminate treatment of all inhabitants of Sodom  
Sarah’s role as the Dark Mother with regard to Hagar and control of Isaac | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: the Feminine in the Godhead** | Section 5.3, Section 5.4 | Gender issue – as cultural element, as fully gendering God, as role of female saints, Mary in personal spirituality |
| Sarah as the Divine Female | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: Divine incest** | Section 5.3 | Relationship base to spirituality  
Need for the Female element in the Divinity |
| Importance and significance of the right relationship as found in the incest motif | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: role of reflecting consciousness** | Genesis 15, Genesis 18:22 | Reflection and reflecting, contending consciousness |
| Abraham’s bargaining and contesting with God | | |
| **MOTIF/THEME: the archetypal hero and renewal** | Section 5.3 | Transformation and ongoing individual renewal |
| Abraham as the archetypal hero who:  
- has divine origins  
- produces the spiritual child, Isaac | | |
6.1 Introduction

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
And his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? Let them proclaim it;
Let them declare and set it forth before me.
Who has announced from old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.
Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from old and declared it?
You are my witnesses!
Is there any God beside me?
There is no other rock; I know not one.
(Isaiah 44:6–8)

This powerful passage from Isaiah makes it clear that God needed witnesses: first to attest to God’s existence; second to acknowledge God’s nature as one God, eternal, infinite in creation, all-knowing; and finally to acknowledge humankind’s need to stand in relationship to the Divine as subject to the King and as supplicant to the Redeemer, as otherwise rootless persons to God as foundational rock. However, in order to act as a witness to God, the individual must have God revealed to them and to stand in relationship with God. Such revelation and relationship, however, changes both the individual human and the God to whom they stand in relationship and this suggests that the individual’s spirituality is experienced dynamically and matures.

I argued in Chapter 6 that the older individual in the Scriptures acts as a signpost in the direction of spiritual maturity. Abraham and his right female partner, Sarah, are old, as are many of the other Genesis protagonists. Their age takes us away from seeing them as young fertility heroes and leads us to identify a differently focused hero: one representing the spiritually fertile as distinct from the physically fertile. The symbolic link between old age and spiritual fertility works because ageing and the approaching end of life challenge the individual to ask questions about life’s meaning and critical values, including issues of individual spirituality.
In an attempt to tease out further insights arising from the old age–spirituality complex, I consider the episode in Luke when the infant Jesus was presented in the Temple. The main drama in this story is found in the responses of two old individuals to the infant Jesus: these older persons were the aged Simeon and the very old prophet Anna (Hannah). At the most basic level, Simeon and Anna were witnessing God in a way both similar and critically different to the witnessing spoken of in Isaiah. Anna and Simeon’s witnessing was critically different because the God for whom they stood as witnesses had radically changed. As in Isaiah’s passage, the old couple attested to the “reality” of God and to the “reality” of God as the one and only God, but now they witnessed the “reality” of Man (Jesus) as God. The relational values had changed: and it was the old witnesses who both identified and revealed this change in humankind’s relationship to the Divine and suggested therefore a dynamic shift in humankind’s spiritual maturity. This focus on witness as an interpretive insight into spirituality is identified by Barton (2006), who argues that Lukan spirituality is about witness.

But what is specifically being suggested in terms of spiritual maturity through the witness of Simeon approaching death and Anna/Hannah as the prophet of great age? Using narrative literary critical analysis I argue that these older characters allow a conceptualisation of spiritual maturity and dynamism to emerge, and this is achieved largely through the structural juxtaposition of the “Jesus” witnesses with their earlier Scriptural “appearances”.

6.2 Relevant literature on the Presentation in the Temple narrative

I discussed the broad interests in current scholarship around the Lukan Presentation in the Temple narrative in Chapter 2, where I also identified that there is relatively little thematic information as a result of close textual analysis of this particular narrative. In terms of the narrative literary critical readings upon which I rely for my study of this narrative, the following findings are pertinent: (i) the Lukan narrative overall explores witness as a theme in discussions around spirituality (Barton 2006); (ii) the Presentation in the Temple narrative misrepresents Mosaic Law and practices (Ward 2003); and (iii) Anna links the narrative to important female figures and their symbolic significance (Bauckham 1997; Levine 2011).
6.3 The Temple Presentation narrative – a literary critical analysis

In an apparently simple narrative structure, the Temple Presentation story unfolds in three parts:

1. Prologue: Mary and Jesus’ father (Joseph is not specifically named) present Jesus in the Temple
2. Simeon and his witness to Jesus
3. Anna (Hannah) and her witness to Jesus.

6.3.1 Prologue

The prologue of the Temple Presentation narrative needs to be placed in some initial context. Immediately preceding this narrative, Luke provides the reader with the miraculous and extreme events surrounding the birth of Jesus: angels in the sky, visiting shepherds, and angelic “good news” messages about the Messiah. Immediately against all this exotic strangeness we next find Jesus’ parents bringing Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem “according to the law of Moses”. A critical tension is immediately established. On one hand we find the breakthrough spiritual event (the arrival of the Messiah with the new Covenant) and on the other, the standard ritual Mosaic Law offering for the first-born son. It is a tension to be played out between Mosaic Law and the Jesus Gospel, which culminates in the crucifixion of Christ and the overthrow of the Moses hegemony. Critically, it is also an important engine for the revelation of a different kind of understanding of the Divine: a spirituality which is based on intimate relationship with God rather than approaching God through the agency of laws, priests and ritual.

There are also some other potential clues that this observance of Mosaic Law is somewhat skewed, thereby signalling that what appears as conforming is in fact not quite so. The clues here are contentious ones. First, there is the issue of who came for purification – Mary or both parents? If it was Mary alone then this purification ritual is in line with Levitical Law – although how the circumstances of Mary conceiving Jesus accommodated this Levitical requirement, requires some pause for thought. If both parents were presenting for purification, which appears to be the preferred wording, then this sat outside the law and ritual. If both parents were accepting of the purification ritual, then something new was being said through this act. Was it an equalising insight that the male as well as the female was “tainted” through the blood of giving birth? Or was it an act of confrontation – a
challenge to the patriarchal perspective that shaped orthodoxy and distorted human spirituality?

Second, there was the issue of Mary’s potential Levitical heritage. This second, and possibly more contentious, issue appears to have remained unresolved in contemporary commentary. Did Mary’s family relationship with the Levite Elizabeth signal that she too was of Levitical lineage? How did this mesh with the claim that Jesus was of the Davidic lineage—even though it was clear in the Lukan genealogy that this line contained several Levite ancestors (Brown, Fitzmeyer & Donfried 1978, p. 156)? In any case, it was all very difficult: according to the Laws of Moses, ascribing Jesus a tribal lineage involved identifying his father because tribal lineage is determined by the father. The Lukan narrator used omission to highlight the father or paternity issue here. While Mary was clearly identified as the mother, the father was not named. Although the reader assumes it was Joseph who was present in the Temple, the ambiguity in the situation arose because Luke had just spent a great deal of dramatic capital claiming God for the father of Christ. So if this is thought through, the problem with this particular Presentation at the Temple is that it does not honour the Mosaic tradition but rather attempts to deceive or confront it. This is because:

- If Mary was of Levitical descent, she was not required to pay the redemption levy—why then were the two birds (orthodoxly) offered at the presentation?
- If Mary was not of Levitical descent but of Davidic descent and it was through her that Jesus is offered as being of the tribe of David—this too was unorthodox because the mother does not determine the tribal line, according to Mosaic Law.
- If the claim made for Jesus as being of Davidic descent was made because of the father’s (Joseph’s) line, then this was a deliberate lie—given Luke’s previous storytelling.

This prologue then, does two important things: first, it shows that rather than conform to the Law, the circumstances around Jesus actually confronted or even denied the Law; and second, much of what Jesus was and what would develop from him, remained open to those who, like the shepherds, had had it revealed to them and witnessed his God-born origin.

The prologue next turns to the two witnesses: Simeon and Anna. Again, a simple set of questions can be applied here: who precisely were the witnesses? What had each individual come to witness? And what was the meaning of their witnessing?
6.3.2 Simeon as witness

Immediately after the prologue, the reader meets Simeon. Who was Simeon and what kinds of insights was the Lukian narrator seeking to convey through this character? Simeon is first introduced as: a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout and looking forward to the consolation of Israel; the Holy Spirit rested on him; and it had been revealed to him (at some stage in the past) that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Simeon’s introduction here suggests a number of issues:

1. The phrase “a man in Jerusalem” could suggest that Simeon was not from Jerusalem (the Holy Place of God) but had come to the city and was now “in” it. This sense of travelling to the Holy Place is later reinforced by Simeon being guided to the Temple by the Holy Spirit. Simeon in this sense is symbolically represented on a journey towards revelation.

2. The phrasing “a righteous and devout” man “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” suggests an individual solidly in the orthodox tradition of the Mosaic Law; and his waiting for the “consolation of Israel” is an orthodox view of the Messiah. The distinction between the orthodox Messiah (“the consolation of Israel”) and the revolutionary Christ is made in the latter reference to the revelation about the “Lord’s Messiah”.

3. The information that “the Holy Spirit rested on him” typically indicates that Simeon had a gift of prophesy, but at this point the only forward looking capacity Simeon had been granted concerns himself: he would not die until he saw the true Messiah. But it was an ambiguous gift. He cannot die until he sees the Christ. The ambiguous nature of Simeon’s situation is again indicated by the very first words he utters on acknowledging the Messiah. These words are a plea for God to keep his promise by allowing Simeon finally to die: “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace …”⁶ If this was the case, what had Simeon done for God to withhold death – until Simeon acknowledged the true Messiah?

⁶ These words famously introduce the Nunc Dimittis, which refer to Simeon’s words in Luke (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.)
The answer to this question requires a consideration of the intertextuality around the character of Simeon in the Scriptures. Simeon was the second son born to Jacob and Leah: together with his full brother Levi he was responsible for one of the most brutal and immoral acts in Genesis – the elimination of Dinah (Genesis 34). Often told as the rape of Dinah, the story is more about the rapacious and vicious nature of Jacob’s sons – particularly Levi and Simeon.

The Dinah story arose from the period when Jacob and his family had travelled to, and bought land in, a region where the prince’s son was named Shechem. On one occasion Shechem had seized Dinah – Jacob’s daughter by Leah – and forced himself on her. While this clearly was a violent act, Shechem was shown from this point forward as having “his soul … drawn to Dinah”; as loving her, as acting tenderly towards her, and as begging his father to negotiate marriage arrangements with Jacob. Shechem and his father even agreed to have themselves and their followers circumcised as means of ingratiating themselves with Jacob and his sons. Jacob and his sons deceitfully pretended to agree to the arrangement. But as they were recovering from the circumcision, Levi and Simeon attacked and killed Shechem, his father and all their men. The rest of the brothers then slaughtered the population – taking everything as booty (even “all their little ones”) because their sister was “treated like a whore”. Without any insight into Dinah’s view of the matter, all the reader knows is that Shechem loved Dinah and was prepared to give and do anything to marry her – hardly “treating her as a whore”. Simeon and Levi’s response was excessive, focused only on their own wounded honour, and rapaciously opportunistic. Nothing further is heard about Dinah and given the “honour killing” tone to the episode, it seems unlikely that she survived Levi and Simeon’s murderous attention. (She certainly did not survive in the text!)

Of the many insights gained from the Dinah narrative, the message about Simeon is clear: he was violent to the point of pre-mediated murder and had, with Levi, eliminated his sister from the record and from the inheritance. He was therefore connected with a spirituality that did not stand in right relationship with the feminine and hence in right relationship with a fully gendered God. It is this that is likely to be the root cause for God’s “curse” upon Simeon.

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7 Simeon’s violent nature is once more suggested in the Joseph narrative. When the brothers were brought before Joseph in Egypt it was Simeon who Joseph had physically restrained: “And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes” (Genesis 42:24). Another aspect indicated in this episode is the capacity of the individual in right relationship with God –here Joseph as the true heir of Jacob – to overcome the moral bankruptcy found at times in humankind.
The Simeon narrative next moves on to precisely what Simeon was witnessing: and what he was now able to prophesy.

First: The first act of Simeon on meeting the Christ was to take him in his arms: “Simeon took him in his arms and praised God…” (Luke 2:28). Simeon’s act confirmed that this child was God made human: the child could be held, and so God as flesh and blood was confirmed. The witness aspect to God manifest was further validated by Simeon’s next sensate claim to have seen the Christ with “my eyes”; and that it was God-made-manifest to all individuals, not just a few select individuals – “which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples” (Luke 2:31).

Second: The next prophesy was that God’s revelation would be available to Gentiles as well as the Israelites. This is an important point in the witness episode in that it directly takes the reader to the argument that this was spiritual revelation beyond the orthodox Mosaic Law. Simeon’s journey had taken him from “righteous and devout” to heretical within the context of Mosaic Law.

Third: Simeon’s prophetic event now turned on Jesus’ parents – specifically Mary. This section of Simeon’s witness is prefaced with the information that Jesus’ parents were “amazed at what was being said about him”. This is usually taken to mean that it was the content of Simeon’s message that amazed them – and this still would hold true. However, it is also possible to understand this comment as: they were amazed that Simeon knew about Jesus as Messiah. They had gone to some effort to make Jesus look like any other first-born Jewish male, yet they knew full well about his birth and what had been foretold for him.

It is important to consider why Simeon specifically addressed his words to Mary-Miriam. The reader is asked in this apparently simple act to consider why it was that Mary-Miriam was singled out for the conversation, rather than Joseph – the male parent? What was the special significance of the female/Mother in the Jesus revelation? The first claim was that this “child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed …”. As a stand-alone claim, it appears to foretell the troubled social future about to unfold in Israel. However, the next phrase suggests an inner, spiritual event rather than an historical-social one. Jesus was to be a sign: “a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed”. Of what was Jesus a sign? The reader needs to consider that the Christ stood for a new way of
thinking about the Divine (God-manifest) and for confronting orthodox rules for relating to God. If Christ represented this and so was a sign, then the challenge to Mosaic Judaism was made, and the challenge to the legitimacy of priests and “holy” people based on their true nature was declared.

Simeon’s next words were to Mary-Miriam: “and a sword will pierce your soul too”. Once more there is a persuasive viewpoint, which sees this as prophetically directed at Mary-Miriam’s sorrow on seeing her son crucified. This still held true. However, the reader must consider why it was Mary’s soul that was pierced and not, for example, her heart? With only the slightest nod in the direction of Freud, it could be argued that just as Mary was penetrated by the Holy Spirit to physically produce Jesus-God, so this child’s future actions will penetrate her soul to produce a radical and direct relationship with the Divine – a new spiritual child. Moreover, as Mary-Miriam stood in the line of inheritance associated with the “right” Female, this radical relationship offered by Christ spoke of a re-gendered Divinity and a more maturely experienced and expressed spirituality.

In summary: a literary critical reading of the Simeon witness narrative yields the following insights:

- The “old” Simeon of the time before the Christ revelation stood for the acceptance of a divinity mediated (and so a spirituality mediated) through the Mosaic Law. In particular, this spirituality denied the Feminine in the Godhead.

- The “old” Simeon’s relational profile was marked by violence and an inability to respond to situations with balance, justice and honesty. His God stands as the God of Terror – one to be feared. Overall he represents an immature spirituality – one with an immaturerly developed moral framework.

- The “old” Simeon was cursed to remain alive until he witnessed the Messiah. He was on a spiritual journey and, working with the Holy Spirit, he was guided to the God-in-Humankind spirituality of the Lord’s Messiah.

- Simeon as a witness and partaker in a spirituality that broke through in the Jesus message was now able to prophesy about the impact of this breakthrough spirituality – particularly in its reach to Gentiles, to affirm the importance of the
Female in humankind’s spiritual story and to stand himself as a sign to the “new”
Simeon: Christ’s Simon-Peter.

6.3.3 Anna as witness

The reader now meets the second witness: Anna. If anything, she would prove an even more powerful witness to the spirituality expressed in the Christ event than Simeon. Who then was Anna? As with Simeon, a brief outline of the features ascribed to Anna in the Presentation narrative is presented below. They seem simple enough:

- Anna was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.
- Anna was a prophet.
- She was of a great age. She lived with her husband for seven years, and then as a widow for 84 years.
- She had never left the temple. She prayed and fasted there night and day.
- At the moment of witnessing Jesus, she proclaimed his divine and redemptive mission.
- She proclaimed the gospel “to all who were looking to the redemption of Jerusalem” – which suggests she then left the temple and re-entered the community.

An analysis of “who Anna is” tells the reader how important her witness of the Jesus event is from a Scriptural perspective.

Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher

In telling the reader that Anna was the daughter of Phanuel, it could be argued that Luke is announcing Anna to be essentially the daughter of “God revealed to humankind”. Contemporary scholarship allows this argument to be developed further. A number of recent commentators have observed the importance of Anna’s father being Phanuel. Levine had already shown that the Lukan narrator pointed the reader in the direction of the named father being the critical relationship, rather than that of the unnamed husband (Levine 2011, pp. 140–141). When Phanuel was probed for intertextual linkages by commentators as varied as Bauckham (1997) and Internet sources (Churchmouse Campanologist, n.d.), Phanuel was found to be a name which was both rarely used and directly linked to the Genesis episode at Peniel, where Jacob wrestled with God and was re-named Israel:
Genesis 32:22–32 tells the story of Jacob’s wrestling with a man for several hours ‘until the breaking of the day’ (verse 24). This story is popularly known as Jacob’s wrestling with the angel. The man put out Jacob’s hip joint but could not best him. The man asked Jacob to stop wrestling. Jacob refused until the man blessed him. The man asked Jacob’s name and renamed him Israel because not only did Jacob prevail against man, but also God. The man then blessed Jacob and, at that point, Jacob realised that he had been wrestling with God … So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” … Peniel, Penuel and Anna’s father’s name — the derivative Phanuel — mean ‘the face of God’… (Churchmouse Campanologist, n.d.),

Phanuel was then the name given to the holy place where God wrestled with Jacob – it meant “the face of God” (NETBible n.d.). In so naming Anna, Luke tells us she was not only the daughter of God but that she was the daughter of God revealed to humankind — just as Christ was now revealed to humankind. She sat in a parallel relationship to Jacob and represented that aspect of the female spiritual heritage that had been suppressed initially by Jacob and his bloodthirsty sons; and that would continue to be suppressed for such a long time in the Mosaic-mediated Divinity. The insight is reinforced in the reference to the tribe of Asher. Asher did not have the prominence of the inheritance lines of Joseph, Judah and Levi; however, it did have one particular inheritance to claim. This was the inclusion of a named female in its line of inheritance; and that named female was Serah, which was a reference back to the originating and enabling matriarch: “… and the name of the daughter of Asher was Serah” (Num 26:46). A similar reference is also found at 1 Chron 7:30: “The sons of Asher: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah, and their sister Serah”.

Anna, a prophet

Anna’s importance as a sign that the Godhead was being re-gendered through the Jesus message is further underscored through her being named as a prophet: female prophets are scarce in the Scriptures and this scarcity in part suggests loss of access to full spirituality. The first female prophet named in the Scriptures is Miriam-Mary. As the older sister of Moses, her fate was to be subjugated to the will and power of Moses and to be left un-partnered and so without a direct inheritance line through children. Miriam-Mary herself was a critical reference both to the importance of female spirituality and to its suppression by the patriarchy and Mosaic Law. Mary-Miriam’s later important role in the Jesus narrative was as a reassertion of this suppressed female spirituality in the Godhead.

Anna’s name appears only in one other place in the Scriptures, as Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel (Ward 2006). It is Anna’s intertextual link to her namesake, Hannah, which
provides the reader with the generational stretch and prophetic reference of this ancient woman. The intertextual relationship between Anna and Hannah tells the reader about a number of important issues carried in the character of Anna.

While Hannah was not named as a prophet, she was nevertheless the driving force behind Samuel, the prophet who established the line of kings through David. The husband, Elkanah, played almost no role whatsoever in Samuel’s assumption of priestly and prophetic roles.

Hannah stood in the line of women who had miraculous births – from Sarah to Mary-Miriam. Hannah was barren and it was God’s intervention that saw her giving birth to Samuel. Hannah made all the decisions about Samuel: his dedication to God as a Nazirite; her refusal to attend the Temple with Elkanah after Samuel’s birth, determining instead to wait until he was weaned; and her making Samuel “priestly” garb in the form of little linen ephods. Hannah was a powerful female in direct relationship with God and dynamic enough to position Samuel for his king-making task.

Hannah’s link with Mary-Miriam was founded first on this miraculous birth heritage; and second on Hannah’s song or prayer. This also strongly echoed Mary’s Magnificat in Luke’s telling of the annunciation story. Her song/prayer contains some important prophetic content. As noted here, Hannah’s song at 1 Sam 2:1 foreshadowed Mary-Miriam herself and her Magnificat at Luke 1:46–55); and Hannah’s reference in her song to the Lord’s anointed was the first prophetic reference to the Messiah, which was again directly picked up by Luke in the Presentation narrative at Luke 2:26.

Anna’s great age and the link with Judith

Elliott (1988) argues that Anna’s age is 105 years and that this specific age links her to the Jewish hero, Judith. Yet again, Luke used intertextual linkages to build a complex of concepts and insights around the figure of Anna. By linking Anna with Judith, the reader is asked to work with information around her potential for community integration and around her role as an image for suppressed female spirituality.

8 The intertextual reference to Elkanah may also be of interest here. Elkanah was the son of Kohah – a rebel against Moses.
Judith as potential for community integration: Jan Willem van Henten (1995) examines the implications of Judith’s genealogy. He shows that Judith’s heritage had traces of almost all the tribes of Israel and in fact could be traced back to Israel himself. In this sense, Judith stood as a community integrative element, particularly in the community rescue event associated with the defeat of Holofernes.

Judith as an image for the suppressed Feminine: after her song of praise – which made it clear that Israel was saved by a female’s relationship with the Divine – Judith retired to her estate, remained un-partnered, and lived to 105 years old. If the reader accepts that Judith represented Israel’s female spirituality, her isolation from relationship and the community suggests that this was also the condition of humankind’s spirituality – disconnected and disempowered. This was offered as a direct parallel with Anna, who Luke stated had “never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer day and night” (Luke 2:37).

A pause in the conversation – who is Anna?

Before this discussion continues with its final two questions – What does Anna witness? and What does this mean? – it is helpful to pause and re-constitute all the information that Luke built into the figure of Anna. From the three spare sentences found at Luke 2:36–37, the reader has been offered a complex of ideas and images to contemplate. Through his use of Scriptural references, Luke encourages the reader to:

1. Engage with Anna as a way of conceptualising feminine spirituality and so a fully gendered Divinity.
2. Consider how Moses’ patriarchal relationship with the Divine had shrivelled Israel’s saving spirituality – leaving it locked away from the community or bloodthirstily expressed as the Dark Mother.
3. Reflect on how humankind’s spirituality is dynamic and ultimately irrepressible. Anna was ancient and compromised but she remained present in the Temple, awaiting transformation in the form of Mary-Miriam.

Anna’s witness and its meaning

After introducing Anna and building this complex of meaning around her, Luke now provides information about what she witnessed and how this is to be interpreted. In short, the reader learns that: at that moment of witnessing Jesus, she proclaimed his divine and redemptive
mission; and she proclaimed the gospel “to all who were looking to the redemption of Jerusalem”.

Luke moves from the description of the ancient prophet “entombed” in the Temple – barely present with her fasting and interior meditations to an explosive in-the-present statement of “(A)t that moment she came, and began to praise God”. With the breakthrough Jesus event, female spirituality found its voice and was again present in the community: “... and began to praise God and to speak to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem”. With the breakthrough Jesus event, humankind now dynamically reached for a different and more mature relationship with its God.

6.4 Summary: Framework considerations arising from the Presentation in the Temple narrative

What are the insights provided by the Presentation in the Temple narrative for this study’s framework for discussing spirituality? My understanding, as an outcome of a literary critical reading of these narratives, is:

1. Orthodoxies and mediated relationships with God, however conceptualised, ossified over time and became formulaic rather than substantial in the individual’s experience of their spirituality.

2. Conceptualising God in an asymmetrically gendered form – in the Judeo-Christian tradition as male – resulted in a humankind whose spirituality was immaturity expressed and open to destructive impulses.

3. Humankind’s spirituality worked in a dynamic way. Individual and community change and transformation were typical outcomes of spiritual experience.

4. Individual spiritual experience was potentiated when it was expressed in the wider community setting – either as witness, such as telling about the good news, or acting in a socially positive manner.

5. Spiritual experience, which supports mature expression, was inclusive: it reached out beyond “tribal” boundaries to the “Gentile” groups and to the marginalised.
All of the issues raised in the above summary relate to elements identified within the Framework of Spirituality developed for this study in Chapter 3.

The significance of Anna and Simeon’s age as symbolic of aspects of human spirituality works in the following important ways:

1. To begin with, both Simeon and Anna revealed stories around spiritual journeying, which links them to the old spirit hero motif found in Abraham.

2. Anna and Simeon, however, were more than “old”. Simeon was the man who could not die and Anna was ancient. Both Anna and Simeon changed with the Presentation in the Temple event. The generational reach they represent also argues that spiritual growth had in earlier times been stunted or otherwise diminished.

3. By allowing the reader to relate to Anna and Simeon intertextually, Luke also used generational age to link a series of complex community memories; and this was especially the case with Anna, with her ties to several great Scriptural matriarchs. Memory and reflection on memories serve as an engine for developing and maturing the individual’s and the community’s spirituality.

4. In the case of Anna’s great age (as a generation link to Hannah and Mary), Luke was able to create information around experience and behaviours associated with fertility/infertility and miracle births: all as commentary on the dynamic nature of humankind’s spirituality.

5. Finally, Simeon’s and Anna’s great age allowed Luke to witness spirituality as transformation: both characters were locked in their respective confined spiritual existence. Simeon stood as the orthodox male follower of the Law; while Anna stood as the pared down spirit, barely alive within Temple orthodoxy. With breakthrough spiritual experience represented by Jesus as the Divine manifest, they were transformed. One was able to clearly see the way forward even if it was to involve pain and difficulties and the other was liberated to find her voice and be active once more in the community.
Age and the issues clustered around it are used in the Temple Presentation narrative to challenge the reader to reflect on the dynamic and transformational nature of humankind’s spirituality. Anna and Simeon were witnesses over human time to this transformational aspect of spirituality. Old age of course was not positioned in a simple one-to-one relationship with “wisdom” or other potential correspondences. Rather, in this narrative, as in the others considered in the present study, old age worked in a complex of references which, when unravelled, revealed a close observation of humankind’s spiritual experiences and the association with transformation.
The Biblical narrative of Job

7.1 Introduction

In the spiritual narratives that were shared by the participants in this study, some older individuals were confronted with finding meaning in a life that had in old age been made difficult by illness, pain and mobility issues. One of the participants, who had lost her independence due to crippling arthritis and whose family was spread around Australia, commented that it was hard “to keep faith when you are old”. Clearly an individual does not have to be old to experience such losses, but they are more typical of the life encountered by older persons. And it is the kind of circumstance that causes individuals to question the purpose and value of living – and to challenge any idea of “God”, let alone a God that has any commitment to humankind. What insights do the Scriptures provide about the way human spirituality encounters some of these important existential questions – questions that are particularly important to the older individual? It is these kinds of questions that the Job narrative appears to address.

7.2 Relevant literature on the Job narrative

I discussed major scholarship interests in current scholarship around the Book of Job narrative in Chapter 2. In that chapter I also noted that there was limited narrative literary criticism of the Job narrative. In terms of the narrative literary critical readings upon which I rely for my study of this narrative, the following findings are pertinent: (i) the Job narrative possesses textual integrity (Prideaux 2012); (ii) the juxtaposition of Job’s pitiful condition and the moralising of his old friends constitutes thematic material relating to the compromised nature of mediated Divine relationships (Phillips 2008; Lockwood 2011); and (iii) the role of the Feminine in the human–Divine relationship is a focus of the Job narrative (Chittister 1990; Magdalene 2006; Legaspi 2008; Suomala 2011).
7.3 The Job narrative – a literary critical analysis

This present study is interested in what insights the Book of Job offers in relation to human spirituality and in particular the existential questions around life’s meaning. Through the lens of a literary critical reading it is argued that the Book of Job represents a point in the Scriptures where human spirituality is robustly challenged in a number of ways. The Book of Job bluntly asks:

1. Is human existence more than a material/physical construct – regardless of “holy” words, what if anything remains after all material, physical and social values are stripped from the individual through old age, illness or mischance? The words of the storyteller – “It’s hard to keep faith when you’re old” – resonated strongly in the Book of Job.

2. If there is a spiritual force or God at work in Creation: (i) what if any is the relationship between humankind and that spiritual force or God?; and (ii) how are human suffering and evil to be made sense of within the spiritual relationship?

The Job narrative sets about interrogating these challenges through a story concerning the trials of an individual called Job – “the greatest” man in the East – who, through the agency of Satan and with God’s approval, is brought to extreme ruin to test his “fear” of the Lord. The Job story is a difficult one for theologians because, among its other questions, it makes explicit the question of how evil came to play such a powerful role in God’s creation. The usual explanations, including humankind’s participation in original sin and humankind’s ill-advised exercise of free will, are largely unconvincing. This is because of the way the testing in Job came about as an almost casual bet between God and Satan; and because of the story’s final assessment of God’s actions towards Job as being “evil” (Job 42:11).

Job’s story unfolds in three parts:

1. A prologue in which the courts of Job and God are presented and the testing and fall of Job is related.
2. A series of dialogues involving Job and three friends, Job and a young visionary, and Job and God.
3. An epilogue in which Job’s fortunes are reinstated.
My structural and narrative literary analysis examines each of these parts in turn. It argues that in part the Book of Job describes the individual’s journey from knowing about God to knowing God. It is a journey in which the individual, Job, through freely choosing to exercise his uniquely human perspective on a moral creation as distinct from a material one, matured and deepened his spirituality to the point of direct dialogue with the Divine, namely with his God; and to a place where this was the meaning of human existence and our renewed horizon. Moreover in this journey from knowing about God to knowing God directly, not only is Job changed: Job’s God is also changed. It is yet a further suggestion that human spirituality does not exist in relation to a remote absolute Divinity – rather human spirituality evolves as long as the individual continues to engage.

7.3.1 Prologue – knowing about God

The Prologue to the Book of Job begins by showing the reader the person and life of the man Job before he is tested by God and Satan. Job is certainly an individual who knew about God but his potential to develop into a spirit hero is only hinted at.

Job before the Testing

What was learnt about Job in this opening section? We were given the menu statement of his character: blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. We also learnt that he was blessed because he had vast material possessions. In one sense, therefore, Job appears to be the mature hero archetype: he had established a fruitful relationship with the female aspects of his world because of his daughters; he had productively established his “kingdom” because he had sons to inherit and vast material possessions; and he had a good relationship with his Divinity. This introduction to Job is in fact the recipe for a “good” man/hero, blessed by God. But what is also telling here, is the basis of Job’s relationship with God and his (Job’s) behaviour of “turning away from evil”. Job’s relationship with God and his determination to shun evil are based on fear rather than an individually considered moral stance. There is also no insight provided into any initial “hero” struggle to confront dangers and demons in order to establish his fruitful world. The question put by this introduction was: did Job represent a likeness of the hero rather than the reality of the hero?

The Prologue also revealed that Job had seven sons who occasioned ritual feast days for each of the seven days of Creation. Job was here shown as relating to the Divine through ritual (e.g. consecrating sons at the completion of each cycle) and through cultural memory.
(e.g. the seven days associated with Creation). The basis of the relationship between Job and God reflected knowing about God through ritual practice and community wisdom.

However what was also revealed was that knowing about God was grounded in a fearful and unchallenged relationship: “It may be that my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts”. It was also true, however, that Job displayed care and concern, even love, for his sons by seeking to protect them from God’s punishment through his observance of ritual. Job at least was demonstrating emotional engagement with his creation; and so the reader gains a sense of depth of character in this initially rather stereotypical “good man”.

The other point of significance referenced in this opening section is the fact that in Job’s court he has three daughters among his children and these three daughters are integrated into the family feasts and rituals. This suggests that Job’s character is richer than the “good man” language led us to believe because while no wife is identified at this stage, Job – through his daughters – did stand in a positive relationship to the feminine aspects of his world.

**Job’s God before the Testing**

The opening verses next invite the reader to consider the court of Job’s God and to make comparisons. Unlike Job’s world, which was regulated by a cyclical and daily routine which reflected God’s creation of Cosmos and Earth and which actively sought to establish a ritual relationship with God, God’s world was temporally neutral and largely relationally indifferent.

Initially we observe that, like Job, God too has sons. These sons are unnamed, which suggests a primarily unconscious and undifferentiated environment; and, unlike Job, God has no daughters. God it appears, has a relationship problem with his masculinely defined identity – there is no female principle present to balance and fully re-gender the Godhead. Moreover, God, unlike Job, appears emotionally disengaged from his environment as evidenced by some of the conversation with Satan.

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9 It is sensible to make a distinction here between God as a definitionally unknowable absolute and the God who reflects Job and Job’s community’s spiritual development – i.e. Job’s God.
Among the sons of God is Satan, whose name calls up his role of the Accuser\(^\text{10}\): a role which would play out as much for Job’s God as for Job himself. It is unclear as to whether Satan was one of God’s sons or some other entity. The ambiguity surrounding Satan was now set to deepen: and the brief discussion which takes place between God and Satan is instructive from this perspective.

“From where do you come?” Jehovah asks Satan: an ambiguous question in this context. On the face of it, it is a simple question asking about Satan’s recent journeying. However, if God was all-knowing and in full control of Creation, God would know from where Satan came. So his question suggests that this is a divinity with under-developed powers. The second place this small piece of dialogue takes us is to God’s potential ignorance about the actual origin of Satan himself – “From where do you come?” In this exchange between Satan and God is perhaps the kernel of an insight about the origin and nature of evil. It actually stems from the God of Job’s own ignorance or unknowing about his Creation, especially moral Creation.

Satan responds to God’s question with a wonderfully vague statement about “roaming about the earth” and “walking upon it”. In short, Satan is evasive and almost childlike in holding out on details from the parent figure. Nevertheless, his response contains one critical item of information. Satan, unlike Jehovah, has actually come into direct contact with humankind’s environment. Satan has walked upon the Earth.

God’s remoteness from humankind is further underscored in his next question to Satan about Job: “Have you considered my servant Job?” God then goes on to describe Job in the cardboard cut-out terms of the opening verses. This template “good” man has no real meaning for God – which is reinforced in his description of Job as a “servant”; and as relating to God in terms of “fear”. This is the relationship level at which God sees his interaction with Job/humankind: it is distinctly unlike Job’s caring relationship with his children.

Satan’s response and challenge to God is a masterpiece of cunning. Satan focuses God’s attention towards the fear nature of the relationship between Job and God. In Satan’s question is the implication that fear indeed represents the appropriate basis of the relationship between Job and his God. His next question implies that Job’s pious relationship

\(^{10}\) NRSV, p. 454 footnote.
is solely bound up in Job’s possessions – his material status; and by extension it is Job’s fear of losing his hold over material things which keeps him in this pious relationship with God.

Satan’s final move is a challenge to God. He takes God down the path of directly interacting with Job, to relieve him of all his possessions, thereby leading Job to forsake his piety and curse his God: “(B)ut stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has ...” (Job 1:11).

There is yet one final twist to come in this opening prologue. First God eschews direct contact with Job – instead he uses Satan to act as an agent in the relationship. How is this to be understood? On one hand it continues the relationship distance between Job and God: God remains remote to Job. By using Satan as his agent, the suggestion could be made that it is the lack of a direct relationship with God that allows Satan and evil to work in material creation. But second, God’s response to Satan also contains a challenge to Satan himself, as well as an acknowledgement that there is more to Job than a materially focused being. God commands Satan, “Very well, all that he has is in your power: only do not stretch out your hand against him!” In this command, God puts Job’s material world in Satan’s power. But in the words “do not stretch out your hand against him” (Job 1:12), God refuses Satan the right to act in an absolutely God-like fashion. Satan can stretch out his hand like God and God implies that the individual “him” is to be differentiated from what the individual materially possessed. God then makes his own challenge to Satan. Essentially God states, “do not overreach your remit and arrogate God’s place, and demonstrate you can in your dealings with humankind differentiate between the individual as material being and the individual as spiritual entity”. It appears that it is not only Job and his God who are tested here: Satan too is under challenge by a God who is seeking to know more about “where have you come from?”

Finally, this prologue section repeats the God–Satan exchange; and has an exchange between Job and his wife as an ambiguous coda to the prologue.

This time, in response to God’s claim that Job has retained his integrity in spite of his trials, Satan increases the stakes by again challenging God to directly interact with Job by robbing him of his physical wellbeing. God again refuses to directly engage and once more uses Satan to act as His agent: Job as a physical being is given over to Satan’s power. However, the power of life and death remain with God – “only spare his life”: Satan’s capacity to influence
humankind remains firmly at the material but nonetheless powerful level of physical dimensional existence.

The prologue verses are rounded off with a brief exchange between Job and his wife. As suggested by the fact that Job has daughters who are honoured in the family, a wife also suggests that Job at some level has a positive and formal relationship to the Female. Job’s wife, however, is unnamed and as Job’s female half is nevertheless shown to be ambiguous. She queries as to whether Job is still maintaining his faith in God and so in his integrity. She then advises Job (depending on how the Hebrew is interpreted\textsuperscript{11}) to either curse or bless God and give himself up to death. It appears that the ambiguity between cursing and blessing is indicative of the existential stretch Job now experiences. Moreover her suggestion to take death as a means of resolving his plight suggests that Job’s female side is moving in the direction of the life denying Dark Mother.

Job is shown however to resist this movement to the dark side: instead he identifies that this impulse was foolish and in effect counter to rational, conscious reflection. But the strength of his position is qualified in that he counters her dark suggestions not with a statement of fact but rather with the uncertainty of a question: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” The dichotomous nature of the response also suggests a number of things:

- The individual could only relate to God and God’s world through a differentiating consciousness; and we could only be involved in the development of a moral creation through responding to “the good” and “the bad”.

- Another way of considering the Feminine’s call to “bless” or “curse” is to see it as a demand for relationship. Before a curse or a blessing is made, a pre-existing relationship of some quality has to exist. Blessing and cursing suggest relationship with another. It is precisely a relationship that currently neither Job nor God really have with each other.

Through this Prologue, the stage is set to address one of humankind’s fundamental existential questions:

\textsuperscript{11} NRSV p. 455 footnote g.
Is a meaningful life that is lived in right relationship to one’s God – however conceptualised – realised through empty rituals and through fear of one’s God? If not, how can the human individual achieve a meaningful existence?

Job as the emerging spirit hero is about to directly take up the challenge and to confront the theological demons that block his path to direct relationship with the Divine.

7.3.2 The testing of Job

There should be no ambiguity as to Job’s condition when the reader first directly encounters him. This is no aesthetically imagined “dark night of the soul”. Job has had everything ripped from him – his vast material wealth, his dominant social standing in his community, and his children who have been killed cruelly by Satan/God. He is seated as a revolting bag of bones and pus-filled flesh in the dust – a thing to be despised and mocked by erstwhile friends and acquaintances. There is no way to ignore the shocking physical reality Job presents. There is also no way to ignore Job’s fury at the injustice he is suffering. Out of this suppurating pile of flesh we learn his eyes “flash” and his voice has the strength to rail and lament at length – at least as long as the verbal output of his dialogue partners. It seems that even on this physical level Job gives the reader clues that he has the potential for reclamation.

The first dialogue partners and the failure of theologising

Job’s first dialogue partners are identified as friends – although given the subsequent conversations it would appear that this description of the three individuals is ironic or even sarcastic. The three “friends” are: Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite.

The first thing to consider about these three characters is the implications around the intertextuality of both their names and tribal allegiances. All three characters are associated with a side-stream spirituality, which has been left behind in the direct Abrahamic line. Eliphaz is linked by his name to the son of Esau who is the overlooked brother of Jacob; Bildad the Shuhite by the same intertextual logic is a descendant of Shuah, who is a son of Abraham by his wife/concubine Keturah and so not a legitimate line of inheritance; and Zophar the Naamathite is linked to Naamah, the sister of Tubal-Cain of the Cain inheritance. All three characters stand in a spiritually underdeveloped, even compromised, tradition. Yet these three present themselves to offer commentary on Job’s condition.
Other clues as to the true nature and value of the three “friends” commentaries are found in their initial approach to Job. The reader is told that they see Job from a distance and that they do not recognise him. This suggests that there is no real connection with, or understanding about, Job and his circumstances from these commentators. Their initial response – and Job reflected his past in participating here – is to ritually wail and throw ashes around and to observe an orthodox seven days of silence. This is a *ritual* approach to the situation and one which appears to be part of the reason Job is facing his present dire problems. Job’s friends then claim to know about God but use ritual to hide their lack of direct relationship with the Divine.

Job opens up the dialogues. This is the first time Job engages directly with the reader. He has broken out of his ritual cocoon. Job’s emotional distress – even fury – at his situation is conveyed in his opening words. He curses the day of his birth, but the words have the sense of almost a spell in which God’s Creation itself is reversed. The “Let” sequence of commands in Job’s opening lament are directed at decommissioning God’s work and accusing God of destroying Job and his world, yet an insight sneaks in here which suggests the direction in which both Job and his God have to develop: “Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me” (Job 3:25). Does this point to Job’s unacknowledged fear of actually having a direct relationship with God? Up until this point, Job has used ritual and template behaviour to distance himself from God and to leave his spiritual nature underdeveloped.

The three “friends” now take turns to dialogue with Job about his insistence on maintaining his integrity and calling for justice from God. Job is demanding a direct exchange with God.

For a moment the reader needs to recall the destroyed and abject figure of Job. His ruin has been brought about by a casual bet between Satan and God. Even if Job were just the recipe for a “good man” it could not be argued that he deserved this treatment. And yet this is precisely what the three “friends” do. In what surely must be taken as a satire on theological enterprise, each one of the commentators moves to the position of condemning Job as “wicked” and deserving God’s retribution. It is a show-piece of situations where blind, unthinking orthodoxy overrides compassion – overrides even the in-your-face reality. Job’s

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12 Each of the three “friends” broadly follows a theological position. Eliphaz is in denial with regard to the injustice in human society and opts for tradition and the “right” of God to be the reprover; Bildad’s position is that man is basically worthless and, given time, God supports the just person; and Zophar’s view is that God is unknowable and the individual just has to believe.
A stingingly assessment of the three appears, if anything, underdone: “As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you worthless physicians. If you would only keep silent that would be your wisdom” (Job 13:4–5).

**The second dialogue partner and ecstatic experience**

After the three “friends” various presentations, Job still holds firm to the demand to have his position directly dealt with by God. At this stage a young man by the name of Elihu steps forward and offers his assessment of Job’s circumstances. By once more referring to intertextual clues around his name, the reader learns that Elihu is a more complex mix of traditions than the three friends. Elihu’s namesake is the son of Nahor and Milcah – Abraham and Sarah’s brother and sister. This links him to the God-chosen line of spiritual inheritance – but in a way that still remains ancillary. The other major intertextual link provided by his name is that he shares his name with the father of Ezekiel, the ecstatic and visionary prophet. This suggests that Elihu is a dialogue partner who also represents a spiritual under-development but who nonetheless is able to directly access the Divine through visions and ecstatic experience.

Elihu’s first commentary is on Job’s three friends: his judgement is that they have failed to address the problem raised by Job (i.e. Job’s call for his position to be accounted for by God).

Elihu next accuses Job, and in a similar vein to the three friends he demands Job accept the judgement of God and stop his rebellious demand for direct dialogue. If the three friends were a satire on theological responses to God, Elihu represents a satire on prophetic behaviour acting as intermediary between God and Humankind. Elihu speaks with “the Spirit of God” and the “breath of the Almighty gives me life”. He references a God speaking in hidden ways, a God who speaks in dreams and night terrors, a God who works through suffering; and he references a mediator figure who is able to speak for the suffering and afflicted before God (Job 34:23–28). This appears to be making a claim for the Prophet as a way through to God rather than demanding, as Job does, a direct relationship.

Elihu’s dialogue then is a mix of jumbled “prophetic”-style statements, denial of the realities of wicked kings and the cruelties of the powerful, and an apparently inspired interlude where God in Nature is ecstatically proclaimed. He too refuses to acknowledge the immorality on both God and Satan’s part to casually bring such destruction upon an individual sentient being.
Elihu is a young man – a point which is made to show that wisdom is not the right of those old in years. However, his youth is also a marker for an early stage in establishing direct relationships with the Divine. Dreams, nightmares and prophesies were spiritual experiences and the prophet-guru could act as a guide to an individual developing their spirituality. In one important sense, however, Elihu fails to deal with the Job problem of calling God into direct relationship: like his three theological predecessors Elihu condemns Job and fails to address Job’s situation as a problem for Job’s God as much as it is for Job. But unlike the three “friends”, Elihu’s visionary prophetic path connects experientially to the Divine. It is after Elihu’s dialogue that God and Job finally interact directly: and while God condemns the three “friends”, he remains silent about Elihu.

**God and Job as dialogue partners**

Finally, after theologians and prophets fail to deliver satisfaction with regard to Job’s predicament and associated demands, God enters into direct dialogue with Job: “Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1). Why a whirlwind? The spiritual is consistently linked with air and wind; and a whirlwind is a structured, visible wind. God therefore is spirit made visible. Moreover, whirlwinds are characterised by swirling dust. The whirlwind therefore is seen to animate dust, which again is part of God’s role as creator, especially of humankind; and the whirlwind from another perspective is wind-animated-dust, which is also a symbol for the human individual. Finally, in its spiralling motion, the whirlwind speaks of the infinite. The whirlwind is a powerful and complex image for the nature and relationship between God and humankind.

God’s exchanges with Job have been seen by some as the behaviour of a bully (Jung 1970) and of a Gnostic demiurge (Hoeller 1994, pp. 166–168). This discussion, however, views the God who presented to Job for dialogue as representing the God who Job was able, in humankind’s limited way, to approach. God as an Absolute remains beyond reach but serves as humankind’s ultimate spiritual destination.

Job’s God asks: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” And given the efforts of all representatives in the Job tale, all five individuals could well step forward to this description. But the individual who caused this direct conversation is of course Job himself. God then commences to emote about his powerful acts of Creation. It is a truly intimidating detailing of Creation achievements. At the end of this section of dialogue:
The Lord said to Job: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty. Anyone who argues with God must respond.” (Job 40:1)

No one within the context of the Job narrative is shown as contending with God – neither in Job’s nor in God’s own courts.¹³ Job is the individual who through his call for moral justice has brought God into direct relationship with humankind. Still, Job, once confronted with the awesomeness of God the Creator, lacks any means at this stage of taking his conversation further. Rather, he acknowledges that he has over-reached himself and seeks to back-track. Instead of being a man of many words, Job is now reticent to speak at all:

*See I am of small account: what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer: twice but will proceed no more.* (Job 40:3–5)

God then sets out on a further demonstration of his infinite power. Initially God links this demonstration to Job’s demand for dialogue, which God immaturely appears to be responding to as a physical strength challenge: “Gird up your loins like a man: I will question you, and you declare to me”. However, in the middle of this muscle flexing, God makes an aside, which reveals the true challenge humankind brings to the Divine:

*Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? ... Will it make supplications to you? Will it speak soft words to you? Will it make a covenant with you to be taken as your servant forever? Will you play with it as with a bird, or will you put on it a leash for your girls?* (Job 4:1–5)

Surely God is not referencing Leviathan here but rather humankind. God accuses humankind of inveigling Him into relationships by using supplications, soft words, covenantal arrangements, engaging playfulness – all gifts of the subtle human reflecting consciousness. Here God acknowledges that, unlike his awesome physical creations, Behemoth and Leviathan, humankind used its gifts to shape and explore the relationship with the Creator. It is a slight but telling insight into the God–Man relationship – a relationship that challenged and at times discomforted God.

The final part of the Job–God dialogue involves Job acknowledging the awe and unknowability of God. It is inevitable that humankind would, like Job, “utter what they do not understand” about “things too wonderful” for them to know. Job both acknowledges his

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¹³ There are occasions within the Abrahamic line of inheritance where individuals have argued or at least debated with God. We have seen this with Abraham and Jacob.
human limitation and his ability to directly speak with God: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear” (that is, Job knew about God) “but now my eyes see you” (that is, Job has a direct relationship; he knew God). Job’s next statement: “therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” reflects appropriately the acceptance of the smallness of man in the face of the Creator God. It also reflects the ultimate humility and sense of grace of humankind’s spirituality.

**God’s dialogue with Eliphaz the Temanite**

The final part of the dialogues section involves God’s words to Eliphaz the Temanite. Before examining the substance of God’s statement, the reader can see that God is now directly engaging with individuals other than Job. God too was changing his approach. The Lord makes it clear that the three friends are wrong in their approach to him; and that Job is right. God repeats the judgement twice to reinforce the point: “you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7–8). Perhaps as a way to still recognise a role for spiritual practice and spiritual guidance God requires the three friends to make sacrifice to God, but only through the agency of the individual who had spoken or who could speak directly with Him. The conundrum as to how to recognise other such mediators however remains unaddressed.

### 7.3.3 Epilogue – knowing God

Job’s journey through the testing took him from a person whose spirituality was framed by knowing about God to a person knowing God through direct relationship. The last segment of the Book of Job finds Job with his fortunes restored and doubly increased. Most profoundly, of all the gifts given to Job by God, his three daughters are given special prominence:

*He named the first (of his daughters) Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job’s daughters: and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.* (Job 42:13–15)

Job’s now named daughters, together with their inheritance, signal to the reader that Job and his world have further developed spiritually by re-balancing the Female into their environment. That this is a direct gift of God underscores the spiritual significance of these daughters. The meaning in Hebrew of Job’s daughters’ names is critical in understanding Job’s blessing. Jemimah means warmth, affectionate, a dove; Keziah means sweet scented spice and Keren-happuch means horn of the eye shadow or cosmetic box for kohl. Job’s
daughters therefore suggest that his blessing entails loving relationships and a spirituality or air, which is suggestive of divinity because the gods are always fragrant. He is also gifted with enhanced vision as suggested in the Egyptian tone to the name – even calling up “the Eye of Horus” in the reference. In addition, this reference to eye shadow recalls Job seeing God and hence the image of eyes that are enhanced with eye shadow.

The Epilogue also sees small but significant changes to Job’s God. As observed in the dialogue with Eliphaz, Job’s God extends God’s direct contact with humankind: he is becoming less remote. There are other important aspects of Job’s God, which appear to signal an increasingly maturing Divinity. First, God’s engagement in creation from a moral perspective is made clear. This occurs when God allows the judgement of the narrative that Job needed comforting “for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him” (Job 42:11). Moreover, in God’s instructions to the theological three, he identifies that they should refer their rituals through Job because he is the one who was in direct contact with God. In doing this, God re-balances spiritual practice towards knowing God rather than knowing about God. Second, Job’s God now re-introduces and acknowledges the Feminine into the declared spiritual environment. The task of re-gendering God is acknowledged and underway. Third, Job’s God sets about developing a renewed relationship with Job and his community in a way that emphasises God’s Moral rather than God’s Creator role: God is merciful to the three friends; God waits until Job positively prays for the three commentators before restoring and redoubling Job’s fortune and God blesses and justifies the contender, Job. Job stands as the real wonder of God’s Creation. He is the individual human who refuses just to fear God and to accept God as an irrational, unknowable force. Instead he demands to dialogue directly with his Creator.

In the final analysis the Book of Job offers no formula or theological statement about the meaning of human existence. The Job narrative argues that meaning is found in the recognition that humankind, as part of God’s awe-filled creation, participated fully in that creation. The fact that humankind participated in the cycle of growth and decay is as awesome as anything else. It was humankind’s existential reach to understand and accept this, which was spiritual. This is Nature knowing and standing in awe of itself. But Job’s narrative takes us to a further spiritual insight: the very struggle to find and establish the right relationship with God was how humankind’s spiritual nature was accessed and developed. It was the ongoing and direct conversation with the Divine, however conceptualised or imagined, which was “the meaning”.
7.4 Summary: Framework considerations arising from the Job narrative

The Book of Job sets the reader the task up front of dealing with what is meant by “old” in the Scriptures. Job and his three friends are physically old but as Elihu (a young man) points out – being physically old does not mean you are wise. As argued in earlier chapters, this tension between an entity/action and its symbolic value is one of the critical ways the Scriptures allow complex arguments to be dynamically conveyed. The spirit hero was old because he undertook the spiritually directed rather than the fertility directed quest. The “old” reference works because this quest for spiritual growth and inward focus is more typical of the second half of life, when material establishment and reproductive issues have already been achieved.

In terms of this study’s framework for discussing spirituality, what then are the insights provided by the Book of Job narrative? The Book of Job suggests a number of important issues for discussing spirituality. These are:

- God is indeed to be experienced in the awe of Creation – in all its beauty, its infinity, its power and its terror. Human spirituality finds the Divine in Nature – especially when the individual identifies as being a part of natural creation. In contemporary culture this realisation of Humankind–God-in-Nature finds expression in dedicated eco-theological studies.

- The individual needs to consider the limitations and dangers of orthodoxy and ritual for their spiritual journey.

- The individual needs to be alert to the limitations of prophets and gurus for their personal spirituality.

- The search for meaning in life as the individual’s physical and material world diminishes is characterised by establishing a direct and individual relationship with the Divine. Ultimately it is this dialogue that the individual is able to establish with God that is the meaning of life.
- Spiritual experience reflects a fully gendered divinity: the importance of including the Feminine in the individual’s spiritual dialoguing needs to be acknowledged.

- Spirituality entails working on the individual’s moral development and social commitment to moral, ethical action. Moral Creation is suggested as the core of the relationship between humankind and the Divine and places the individual human as co-creator alongside God.

These then are the central issues which arise from the Book of Job and which are congruent with elements of my study’s Framework of Spirituality. Like Job, many of our Australian community’s older individuals are left to physically decline without any apparent way forward; and are shut out of opportunities for growth and for being valued. Job, however, suggests that this situation does not have to be accepted. Rather, Job shows that the individual has a spiritual horizon, which is never closed to them as reflecting individuals. It is not, however, an easy task to undertake because looking to that horizon requires the individual to forgo formulaic responses and to search out their own spirituality, to identify new personal resources, and to assert the value of their own individual story.
Presentation of results:
The narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna

8.1 Thematic elements in the selected Biblical spiritual narratives

The three scriptural narratives I analysed through a literary critical methodology yielded insights around how old age worked symbolically in the Scriptures to progress understanding of humankind’s spiritual experiences and nature. Abraham spoke about how growth as an individual involved working with one’s spiritual nature throughout the full span of years. Simeon and Anna told the reader that human spirituality was an inextinguishable aspect of being human and that it stayed present and ready to personally transform both the individual and their community. While Job is a troubling and unusually complex scriptural narrative it finally reveals that formulaic approaches to our spiritual natures can only take one so far. The individual must eventually break through to their own personal spiritual nature, and from this build meaning into their life.

The detailed analyses that have provided the thematic data arising from the Biblical spiritual narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna are found in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of my study. A consolidated summary of these thematic elements associated with its Biblical narrative is provided below in Table 8.1.

**Abraham**

As argued in Chapter 5, a literary critical analysis of the Abraham narrative, which considers Abraham as an old protagonist, yields the following thematic material:

1. Spiritual engagement is above all else a personal and individual activity.
2. The role of mediation between an individual and the Divine is culturally powerful, as captured in the image of the priest-king. However, it entails dangers to which the individual must be alert, as suggested in Melchizedek’s proximity to the King of Sodom.
3. Addressing the need for female spirituality to be captured in the Godhead is critical for achieving spiritual growth and maturity.

4. The spiritual journey is its own goal and one that has no end point or limiting horizon.

5. The “old” individual’s memories and reflecting consciousness are engines for spiritual engagement and development.

**Anna and Simeon**

As argued in Chapter 6, a literary critical analysis of the Presentation in the Temple narrative, which considers Anna and Simeon as old protagonists, yields the following thematic material:

1. Orthodoxies and mediated relationships with God, however conceptualised, can ossify over time and became formulaic rather than substantial in the individual’s experience of their spirituality.

2. Conceptualising God in an asymmetrically gendered form – in the Judeo-Christian tradition as male – resulted in a humankind whose spirituality was immaturely expressed and open to destructive impulses.

3. Humankind’s spirituality works in a dynamic way. Individual and community change and transformation are typical outcomes of spiritual experience.

4. Individual spiritual experience is potentiated when it is expressed in the wider community setting – either as witness such as telling about the good news or acting in a socially positive manner.

5. Spiritual experience, in mature expression, is inclusive: it reaches out beyond “tribal” boundaries to the “Gentile” groups and to the marginalised.

**Job**

As argued in Chapter 7, a literary critical analysis of the Job narrative, which considers Job as an old protagonist, yields the following thematic material:

1. God is indeed to be experienced in the awe of Creation – in all its beauty, its infinity, its power and its terror. Human spirituality finds the Divine in Nature – especially when the individual identifies as being a part of natural creation. In contemporary culture this realisation of Humankind–God-in-Nature finds expression in dedicated eco-theological studies.
2. The individual needs to consider the limitations and dangers of orthodoxy and ritual for their spiritual journey.

3. The individual needs to be alert to the limitations of prophets and gurus for their personal spirituality.

4. The search for meaning in life as the individual’s physical and material world diminishes is characterised by establishing a direct and individual relationship with the Divine. Ultimately it is this dialogue that the individual is able to establish with God that is the meaning of life.

5. Spiritual experience reflects a fully gendered Divinity: the importance of including the Feminine in the individual’s spiritual dialoguing needs to be acknowledged.

6. Spirituality entails working on the individual’s moral development and social commitment to moral, ethical action. Moral Creation is suggested as the core of the relationship between humankind and the Divine and places the individual human as co-creator alongside God.

### 8.2. A comparison of the Biblical thematic data and the Framework of Spirituality

This research reports the thematic data in terms of the Framework of Spirituality. The Framework of Spirituality was detailed in Chapter 3 of my study and it integrates definitional and conceptual material arising from (i) appropriately conducted qualitative research and (ii) conceptual studies associated with Schneiders and her colleagues. For the purposes of comparison, the thematic data is represented in tabular form against the source narrative as well as against a consolidated thematic data set. In some instances the description of the Biblical narrative theme needed to be re-phased to assist in establishing the comparison with the Framework of Spirituality. Where this circumstance arose, the re-phrasing is identified and explained at the comparison point within the Framework of Spirituality. This comparison of the Biblical thematic data and the Framework of Spirituality is provided as Table 8.1 at the end of this chapter. The comparison of thematic data with the Framework of Spirituality elements demonstrates that the Biblical spiritual narratives thematically match the elements of the Framework of Spirituality.
8.3 Summary

This chapter presents the findings of the narrative literary critical readings of the Abraham, Job, Anna and Simeon Biblical narratives. These findings when compared with the thematic elements in the Framework of Spirituality show that the Biblical thematic material is congruent with that of the Framework of Spirituality. This in turn argues that the Biblical narratives and contemporary spiritual narratives share common thematic material. Both sets of narratives provide insights about human spirituality which is argued to be fundamental to human nature and the means to an ever extending future even in extreme old age. The two sets of stories – ancient and modern – inhabit the same space and talk about the spiritual experience.
Table 8.1  
Comparison of the Biblical thematic data and the Framework of Spirituality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abraham</th>
<th>Anna &amp; Simeon</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Consolidated</th>
<th>Framework of Spirituality</th>
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<td>Spirituality as a phenomenon / lived experience</td>
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<td>Types of spiritual experience</td>
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<td>Divine directly experienced</td>
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|         |               |     |             | The personally spiritual |
| ✓       |               | ✓   | ✓           | Personal adjustment/maladjustment outcomes of spirituality |
| ✓       |               | ✓   | ✓           | Meaning-of-life moments |
| ✓       |               |     | ✓           | Relationship orientation |

|         |               | ✓   | ✓           | The communally spiritual |
| ✓       |               | ✓   | ✓           | Social values, morality, ethics |
| ✓       |               |     | ✓           | Contribution to and care for others |
| ✓       |               | ✓   | ✓           | Potential for both positive & negative outcomes associated with spirituality |

| Contesting over destruction of Sodom | ✓       | ✓   | ✓           | The culturally spiritual |
|                                     |         |     |             | Spirituality as contemporary cultural expression of whole-of-person and whole-of-society issues* |
|                                     | ✓       | ✓   | ✓           | Gender |
|                                     |         |     |             | Religion |
|                                     | ✓       |     | ✓           | Ecumenical and interfaith exchanges |
|                                     |         |     | ✓           | Ecology |
|                                     |         |     |             | Politics and power |
|                                     |         |     |             | Secularism |
|                                     |         |     |             | Radicalisation |

|         |               | ✓   | ✓           | The transformationally spiritual |
|         |               |     |             | Reflection |
| ✗       |               | ✓   | ✓           | Dynamic nature of spirituality |
| ✓       |               |     | ✓           | Transforming lived experience |

*This is not an exhaustive list and other contemporary issues may be addressed here
Findings and implications of the study

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 9 reviews this study’s research findings in terms of its three research questions and particularly in terms of the narrated experiences of older contemporary Australians. The study’s findings are discussed as they relate to applicable social science and theological scholarship. Similarly, the implications for those contexts that were earlier identified in Chapter 1 as important for the study are discussed in this chapter. This discussion gives rise to the significance of the research and how future studies should build on my research.

The research problem and research questions

This study sought to address the research problem of the relative lack of data available on the accounts of spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australian individuals and on its articulation with Biblical spiritual narratives and with disciplinary scholarship on spirituality. Three research questions were constructed in order to investigate the research problem. The three research questions are:

Research Question 1:

What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

Research Question 2:

What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

Research Question 3:

Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship on spirituality from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?
Organisation of the research to address the research problem

The research undertaken by this study was organised in the following way in order to address the research problem and the associated research questions.

First, key terms, concepts and definitions were clarified in terms of the research problem and the research questions; the rationale for the articulation of contemporary spiritual narratives with Biblical spiritual narratives was argued; the theoretical perspective on ageing and spirituality for this study was identified; the contexts in which the research had applicability were established; and the significance of the study in terms of these contexts was foreshadowed.

Second, a review of the literature applicable to the research problem was undertaken and organised to provide guidance for each of the research questions in terms of scholarship which could be relied upon for the study, and in terms of gaps in the literature, which the research would need to address. The key findings of the literature review were: there were no narrated experiences of older contemporary Australians in a complete narrative format; there were no re-contextualisation studies involving the narrated spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians; there were few literary critical studies which employed a narrative literary critical approach to the symbolic and thematic value of older protagonists and their actions in the Bible; the primary research interests around ageing and spirituality were on the practical application of spirituality in the context of health care, palliative care, aged care and pastoral work; and there was no consensus or suggested consensus framework for discussing spirituality across disciplines.

Third, a bricolage research design was chosen to allow for the complexity of contexts, interpretive positions and perspectives, and conceptual constructs which were associated with the study. This study had to embrace “flexibility and plurality by amalgamating multiple disciplines” (here, selected social sciences, theology and humanities); “multiple methodologies” (here, interpretive interactionism and literary criticism); and varying theoretical perspectives (here, Jungian and feminist) (Denzin & Lincoln 1998 pp. 17–18). The research design also incorporated a Framework of Spirituality specific to this study that was employed for comparison and re-contextualisation purposes. The Framework of Spirituality results form a synthesis of the disciplinary literature on spirituality.
Fourth, as required by an interpretive interactionism study, data was collected and analysed in terms of the narrated spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians. This was reported as the response to Research Question 1. Similarly, data was collected and analysed in terms of the Biblical narratives of contemporary older Australians as a narrative literary critical study. This was reported as the response to Research Question 2. The Framework of Spirituality was employed to compare and re-contextualise the Biblical spiritual narratives and the conceptual model of spirituality synthesised from the disciplinary literature in terms of the spiritual narratives of contemporary older Australians. The re-contextualisations were reported as the response Research Question 3.

Finally, key findings from the research have been identified and will now be discussed in the following sections along with the implications of these findings. Findings will be discussed in terms of their associated research question; and the implications will be discussed in terms of the applicable context.

9.2 Key findings

Findings of the study for Research Question 1

What are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians?

The study’s initial finding related to the absence within the narratives of thematic data associated with the credal statements of orthodox Christianity of the major faith traditions. In a study by Elaine Lindsay on spirituality in contemporary Australian women’s fiction *Rewriting God: Spirituality in contemporary Australian women’s fiction* (2000), Lindsay commenced her argument with observations about “real life” spiritual concerns of contemporary Australian women. She argued that spirituality as a discussion in the Australian context was male-centric and women were almost entirely absent, and that models of spirituality reflected men’s not women’s spirituality (2000, p. 2). This male-ness of Australian spirituality was part of the research territory that Lindsay commenced to explore and that remained outside the scope of my study. However, her introductory observations were of interest to my research, where she argued that it “soon becomes evident that women who are not theologically trained show little concern with theological formations” (2000, p. 59) around the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. She
proceeded to reference Elaine Wainwright who “believes that such language is ‘a contradiction of the word of creation’” (2000, p. 59). Lindsay’s argument here supported the findings of my research associated with the contemporary spiritual narratives. Her observation about the Australian woman’s lack of engagement with the Trinity was confirmed by both male and female participants in my qualitative study. The creedal connection was largely broken in the lived spiritual experiences of contemporary older Australians evidenced in my research. As would be argued in the following discussion individual participants who professed commitment to an orthodox Christian faith tradition did so through strong commitments to their Church community, and through direct conversations with God, Jesus, Mary or saints to whom they had a personal commitment. Even practices that suggested creedal engagement, such as saying the Rosary or faithfully attending Mass, were largely framed in a family tradition of saying the Rosary together or in close friendship with Church community members. As Jewell (2011) observes “I have subsequently come to realize that relationships are an all important aspect of spirituality” (p.15).

Claims such as those of Dorothy A. Lee that authentic spirituality involved recognising “the incarnation, with its implications for understanding God, revelation and the human person (including cross and resurrection); human existence and its significance, lived in the context of community; the incoming reign of God, already realised in Christ; and participation in the Triune life of God” (2012, p. 10) were not supported in my findings. Lee’s and similar claims were also not supported in the findings of Hughes’ 2007 study of Generation Y’s beliefs around spirituality and meaning. Hughes eventually abandoned using the term “spirituality” in the title of his book, calling it instead *Putting life together*. He did this “because when it came to the domains of spirituality or meaning, the young people [he] spoke with talked more in terms of putting their beliefs together themselves in a creative fashion” (Hughes quoted in Sharkey 2010, p. 9).

The breach in commitment to orthodox creedal formulations appeared to extend across generations, from the older individuals within my study to the youth of Hughes’ research. Participant 12 in my research makes the point well: “… I realised that my religious life wasn’t enough: there had to be more to life than my orthodox Catholic experience was providing. This realisation led to problems with the Eucharist – particularly with poor liturgical practices at Mass. I started actually listening to the Eucharist prayers and I thought, ‘I don’t believe
that’. And then I thought about the Creed and I thought, ‘I don’t understand or agree with that’.

As a final observation around this finding of my research: the rejection – deliberate or otherwise – of creedal orthodox Christianity did not have as a corollary the rejection of a relationship with God or with spiritual searching. These individuals were not case studies in creeping secularism. Instead, they directed us beyond 4th century creational formulations towards a more complex spiritual space, which was nonetheless grounded in Christian moral values, positive family and community orientations and a direct relationship with God. Again, Participant 12 expresses the situation well: “I am always searching for ways and places to grow as a spiritual individual. I feel free to search within my Catholic tradition ... but one’s spirituality is an evolving creation – it requires moving out of your comfort zone and actively searching.”

**Finding 1**

*There is minimal evidence of orthodox creational formulations in the spirituality of older Australian individuals, as evidenced in their spiritual narratives.*

In Chapter 4, the analysis of the rich text of the 17 spiritual narratives identified 45 thematic elements, which were associated with the spiritual experiences of the older individual participants. As argued in Chapter 2, there was little scholarship around identifying the thematic content of the spiritual stories of contemporary older Australians. The only significant work in this field from an Australian perspective was that provided by MacKinlay’s seminal research (2004). My thematic data set compared closely to the data set which MacKinlay reported in her study of spirituality and ageing (2004, pp. 222–224) and which I summarised as Table 3.1 in Chapter 3 of my study. My research, however, extended MacKinlay’s thematic data in that her thematic data set is limited to 26 elements (if my summary of her work is accepted), whereas my data set included 45 identified elements. The interpretive significance of this finding related to an increased understanding of the richness and complexity of the spirituality of older contemporary Australian individuals and support for scholarship around human potential and ongoing psychological development in later life. This led to Finding 2.
Finding 2
The thematic data set identified through the qualitative interpretive interaction study offered evidence for the nuanced nature and complexity of the spiritual experiences of the 17 participants. This suggested support for models of human spirituality linked to studies of human potential and ongoing human psychological development.

Moreover, my research argued for a cohort construct of spirituality generated by the 17 older contemporary participants, which was comprised of (i) thematic content, (ii) sequenced relationship among the constructed meta-themes, and (iii) dynamic relationships. This model provided evidence for the dynamic nature of the spirituality of contemporary older individuals. It supports Schneiders’ concept of spirituality as dynamic (1989, 1997, 2000, 2011, 2013); Jungian theories on reflecting consciousness (1967); and Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence (1999, 2005). This led to Finding 3.

Finding 3
The cohort model of spirituality generated by the identification of the thematic elements of the spiritual narratives provided evidence for the dynamic nature of spirituality and also evidence for theories of ageing and spirituality developed by Jung and Tornstam.

The richness, complexity and dynamism of the spiritual experiences of older individuals as evidenced by the thematic data identified in my analysis were found equally in individuals who identified as non-orthodox religious and those who identified as orthodoxly religious. This circumstance identified the research danger of treating “conservative orthodox religious”/“uncritically Christian” as a variable in opposition to “flexibly religious”/“reflectively Christian” as a variable. This research practice is found, for example, in the studies of Kaldor, Hughes & Black (2010, pp. 27–32). The importance of capturing the participant’s “voice” as evidence in terms of nuanced individual spirituality was also highlighted here (Ganzevoort & Bouwer 2007). This observation led to Finding 4.

Finding 4
The research decision to place those of an orthodox Christian faith tradition into definitional boxes with terms such as “narrow”, “blinkered” and “inflexible” was not supported by the thematic evidence of the spiritual narratives. The rich and complex spiritual life of “orthodox” participants, together with the contesting nature of their commentary, requires researchers with a focus on orthodox faith traditions to frame their studies in a carefully differentiated manner.
Aird argued in her research (2007, p. 209) that contemporary social science research on spirituality was constrained by limitations around conceptual language associated with variables. Aird’s argument is supported by my study because the range and nuanced character of the spiritual narratives, as well as the interplay between narrative elements, require variables that capture the dynamic and complex interplay of many thematic elements. This circumstance led to Finding 5.

**Finding 5**

*The range and nuanced character of the spiritual narratives, as well as the interplay between narrative thematic elements, support research design approaches which reflect such dynamic interplay across thematic content elements of spirituality as a complex phenomenon.*

**Findings of the study for Research Question 2**

What are the thematic elements in the Biblical spiritual narratives of old individuals as represented by Abraham, Job and Simeon and Anna?

In Chapters 4, 5 and 6 the literary critical analysis of the Biblical spiritual narratives identified thematic elements associated with the spiritual or God experiences of the old protagonists: Abraham, Job, Anna and Simeon. These thematic elements were consolidated and presented in Table 8.1, in Chapter 8. In the discussion of findings associated with Research Question 3, it is demonstrated that this set of thematic elements was consistent with the thematic consolidation around contemporary spiritual narratives. The literary critical analysis of Biblical themes associated with old age and the narratives of older protagonists argued in support of Barton (2006) that the Scriptures offered nuanced discussions around human spirituality which in part spoke of a direct unmediated relationship with God; of the centrality of the Feminine in the Divinity; and of the human–God relationship as one of co-creation of a moral universe. Moreover, the thematic Biblical data provided evidence that Old Testament spirituality was as nuanced as that of the New Testament. This led to Finding 6.

**Finding 6**

*Thematic data associated with old age in the Bible supported the argument that both the Old and New Testaments provide insights into human spirituality, which were consistent with contemporary disciplinary scholarship on spirituality.*
Findings of the study for Research Question 3

Are the thematic elements in the spiritual narratives of older contemporary Australians and those in the Biblical narratives of Abraham, Job, Simeon and Anna consistent with contemporary scholarship from both spirituality as an academic discipline and selected social science perspectives?

In Chapter 4, thematic data was identified through an interpretive interactionism analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives. A summary of that thematic data was provided against the Framework of Spirituality developed for this study. Webster (2003), Deagon & Pendergast (2012) and Schmidt (2005) offered similar developments of frameworks for investigating spirituality. In a similar fashion, in Chapter 8 I provided a thematic summary of the Biblical narratives against this study’s Framework of Spirituality. In order to facilitate a comparison between the contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives and to judge whether the two narrative data sets were consistent with contemporary scholarship, I provided a consolidated table of the Biblical and contemporary thematic material against the Framework of Spirituality. This is provided as Table 9.1 at the end of this chapter. Table 9.1 demonstrates that there is a significant degree of congruence between the two spiritual narrative thematic data sets, and between the two spiritual data sets and the Framework of Spirituality. It can be argued therefore that contemporary scholarship in terms of research undertaken by selected social sciences and a broadly conceptualised spirituality as found in the work of Schneiders and her colleagues (Schneiders 1989, 2002; Sheldrake 2010) largely reflected the spiritual experiences of older individuals in contemporary Australia as well as Biblical discussions around human spirituality. There were areas of contention and omission between the frameworks and these will be addressed below in the discussion of findings.

The completeness of the congruence between the thematic data sets and the Framework of Spirituality made an important argument – especially in terms of the contemporary spiritual narratives. This was a self-selected cluster of 17 individuals over 65 years old from a wide range of life experiences and present circumstances. Yet the spiritual stories of their experiences – both experienced and witnessed – revealed the same complexity and nuancing as that identified by sophisticated research carried out by social scientists and theologians that formed the basis of this study’s Framework of Spirituality. This was what the data from the 17 narratives provided and it argued for a rich spiritual life at work in circumstances that were often suburban and confined through age and illness.
The considerable level of congruence between the two thematic data sets associated with the contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives and the Framework of Spirituality led to Finding 7.

**Finding 7**

*Contemporary scholarship, in terms of research undertaken by selected social sciences and in terms of a broadly conceptualised spirituality as found in the work of Schneiders and her colleagues, reflected (i) the spiritual experiences of older individuals in contemporary Australia; and (ii) Biblical discussions around human spirituality. It was shown that both contemporary and Biblical spiritual narratives explore spirituality as an existential phenomenon; the personally spiritual; the transformationally spiritual; the moral, social or communally spiritual and the culturally spiritual.*

It was also demonstrated in the consolidated thematic data represented in Table 9.1 that the thematic data of spiritual narratives of older Australians was directly comparable to the Biblical spiritual narratives. This circumstance contradicted arguments such as those offered by Lee 2012, p. 6) and led to Finding 8.

**Finding 8**

*The spiritual narratives as evidence of the “lived” experience of contemporary older Australians were directly comparable to the Biblical spiritual narratives and to Biblical spirituality.*

There were, however, points at which the data sets and the Framework of Spirituality were not apparently congruent. These points of departure also were important. Their identification offers future research and practice opportunities for both researchers and those associated with aged related professional practice.

**Areas of difference between the thematic data sets and the Framework of Spirituality**

The areas of difference between the two thematic data sets and the Framework of Spirituality are also highlighted in Table 9.1. It can be seen here that these areas of difference are: (i) identifying the qualities associated with the spiritual experience; (ii) communicating the spiritual experience/experience held private/witness; and (iii) cultural frames and spirituality: religion – contestability, political power and social control, radical secularism, radicalisation of religions.
Identifying the qualities associated with the spiritual experience

Scholarship material did not provide significant insight into the details associated with the nature or quality of contemporary spiritual experience. The effect of this lack of data was significant on at least two points. First, it denied the spiritual experiences of older individuals the richness and diversity that characterised their experiences and stories. This denial was in its own way a critical one because a stereotype of “grey” old age was perpetuated. Second, the failure to capture the richness and diversity of the spiritual experiences and stories robbed these of their sense of being “real” and legitimate. This played to another stereotype – the one identified earlier in Lee’s (2012) claim that this is not authentic spirituality. This led to Finding 9.

Finding 9

The failure of some scholarship to recognise and document the richness and diversity of the spiritual experiences of older individuals has contributed to the perpetuation of a number of stereotypes prejudicial to older individuals and their right to have their ongoing personal maturation recognised.

The range and quality of spiritual experiences in the Biblical narratives, however, received better recognition in the scholarly literature. Biblical scholars acknowledged and offered interpretations around spiritual experiences; for example, Job with God speaking in the whirlwind, God visiting Abraham in a terrifying campfire vision, or angels inserting themselves into everyday conversations and activities.

Communicating the spiritual experience

The contemporary cohort thematic data set included communication issues associated with spiritual experiences. These lacked prominence in the Framework of Spirituality. This area of difference included (i) keeping the experiences private; and (2) acting as a witness to the spiritual experiences of loved ones.

- Experience held private: As detailed in the analysis of the cohort experiences, participants commonly held their experiences private. They were not shared with others or only with close family members. There was a range of reasons for this silence – chief among which was the fear of being thought “strange” or “mad”. This supported MacKinlay’s evidence (2004, p. 227).
• Witness: Identified scholarship did not deal with the issue of participation in the domestic spiritual experience of individuals close to the participant. Many of the older spiritual storytellers gave witness to the spiritual experience of a significant other and thereby engaged themselves in the experience.

This leads to Finding 10.

**Finding 10**

*Fear of being embarrassed or ridiculed as “mad” prevented older participants from sharing their spiritual experiences and stories. The underground nature of the stream of spiritual experience at work in contemporary society remains both an untapped resource in terms of human potential, and a concern in terms of suppressing powerful human emotions and needs in an increasingly dominant population demographic.*

**Cultural frames and spirituality**

There were a number of points where the two frameworks did not correspond closely to each other. These were as follows:

• Religion: While both frameworks referenced orthodox religion as a cultural response to the spiritual experience, scholarship at times and especially from the social sciences perspective typically viewed those of an orthodox persuasion as personally inflexible (Kaldor, Hughes & Black 2010, pp. 27–32). The cohort material on the other hand revealed that many of the “orthodox” Christian spiritual narrators actively contested the practices and behaviours of their Church. Contestability was an important feature of this cohort.

• Social activism: Discursive scholarship referenced a range of activities and movements relating to social activism. These included:
  - political power and social control
  - radical secularism
  - radicalisation of religions.

These radical social and community movements were not evident in the stories of the 17 participants. If considered within the insights provided by Jung’s archetype of the hero, social activism was situated more appropriately within the territory of the young, kingdom building
The spirit hero motif more closely identified with old age would be less likely to be found in this social activism area. This observation led to Finding 11.

**Finding 11**

*Spiritual experience framed within cultural references to social activism and radical social movements were not found in this study and were more likely to be found in cohorts of younger individuals.*

**Other areas of observed difference**

The iterative dynamics of spiritual experience were not as evident in the peer-reviewed literature that was used in part to develop The Framework of Spirituality as they are in the two sets of thematic data. As a result of Denzin’s methodology (1989), it was apparent that issues around cultural contextualisation in the contemporary spiritual narratives demonstrated an iterative relationship between the individual and their community. Similarly, when reflecting consciousness was considered, participants engaged in an iterative play between memories and the re-working of them. These iterative circumstances point to the nature of dynamism at play in the spiritual experiences of older individuals. This leads to Finding 12.

**Finding 12**

*The iterative dynamism at play in the spiritual experiences of older individuals requires further research attention. This dynamism contradicted the stereotype of old age as necessarily passive and unexciting. It can be argued that it is a mistake to understand physical limitation associated with old age as also spiritually limiting.*

The focus of the contemporary participants was fixed on the present moment. While some participants speculated on what might happen in any afterlife, there was no extended discussion around death or fear of death. In the case of some of the participants who were in their late eighties or nineties, their impending death played little or no part in their spiritual stories. MacKinlay (2004, p. 185) also observed this relative lack of engagement with death and dying. However, her participants were drawn from a Third Age group and somewhat removed from death as an immediate concern; and she interpreted this temporal distance from death as perhaps the reason for her participants’ lack of engagement with the issue. My participant cohort was largely comprised of individuals over 80 years old; yet this group also demonstrated a lack of engagement with death and dying. This leads to Finding 13.
Finding 13

The spiritual experiences and stories of the older participants were life focused and oriented to the present moment. Death and dying were not declared issues for this cohort.

9.3 Reflections on theory

The significance of the research findings will be discussed at a later point in this chapter. What now follows are some reflections on the earlier theorising in Chapter 1 around spirituality for older contemporary Australians. It will be recalled that this study was positioned at a theoretical level with the work of Jung in terms of his concepts of individuation and the role of conscious reflection in the later stages of human life (Jung 1967); and with the theory of gerotranscendence developed by Tornstam (1999, 2005, 2011). The findings of the study provide evidence to support: (i) Jung’s theory of individuation through active reflection on memory being a task of particular significance in the later stages of human life; and (ii) Tornstam’s theoretical model of gerotranscendence where the focus in later life shifts from materiality to questions about the meaning of life. There were major thematic clusters in the narrated data collected from the older participants around reflection on memories and on retained emotional power of these memories. Similarly, there was thematic material around questions of life’s meaning and the enjoyment of living life in the moment, which support Tornstam’s work. The advances made by this study with regard to this body of theoretical work are in the evidenced-based extension of the theories to the Australian context.

In terms of concept development, advances have been made in re-framing Schneiders’ articulation of spirituality (1989, 1997, 2000, 2011, 2013) for application in the context of social science research. Also, in terms of conceptual modelling, advances have been made with regard to the construction of a Framework of Spirituality which integrates disciplinary knowledge associated with both social science and theology; and advances have been made with regard to the development of an evidenced based and cohort generated Model of Spirituality.
9.4 Reflections on methodology

The study’s methodology has made two important advances. These are the application of a bricolage research design to an interdisciplinary study which investigates disciplinary knowledge associated with the Humanities in terms of literary studies, with social science evidenced based research and with disciplinary knowledge that is associated with theology. The flexible research design potential of bricolage facilitates a shared dialogue space to be methodologically established, which again actualises Schneiders’ conceptual work on spirituality. The research design of bricolage offers an approach that resolves the use of methodologies from at times different epistemological and ontological perspectives; but the rigour of the research is not compromised given the appropriate application of each participating methodology to the research.

The second contribution to methodology is provided as evidence on the comparative effectiveness of qualitative methodology. It is an observation on the limitation of quantitative approaches to the study of spirituality. If Kaldor, Hughes and Black’s (2010) study on meaning of life and spirituality in Australian society is considered, their study reports survey sample sizes in the order of 1500 respondents. However, the information collected in terms of the thematic content is less detailed and less sensitive to issues of dynamics and thematic relationships than is the data collected and analysed in MacKinlay’s qualitative interview study with 24 participants (2004, p. 41); and in this qualitative interview study with 17 participants.

9.5 Reflections on re-contextualisation

It will be recalled that earlier in this study I referred to Deagon and Penderast’s work (2012) on re-contextualising spirituality in terms of health and well-being. Deagon and Pendergast refer to Singh’s (2002) study on the contextualisation of discourse in the context of pedagogy. They advanced Singh’s thinking in terms of their research focus on conceptualising of spirituality; and sought clarification of the currency of the concept from the “real world” (sic). In terms of the research undertaken by these researchers this clarification of currency involved reviewing global (United Nations) references to spirituality in policies and debating medical models of wellness.

In terms of my study, the issue of currency was accounted for through: a review of applicable peer-reviewed research as generally published over the past 15 years; and collecting,
analysing and interpreting the thematic elements of spirituality of older contemporary individuals in terms of disciplinary scholarship. Therefore this study created the opportunity for a number of important re-contextualisations to take place. The first re-contextualisation was achieved by comparing the findings of the thematic data of the contemporary spiritual narratives of older Australians with the thematic data identified in the selected Biblical spiritual narratives of old protagonists. There was considerable shared thematic material between the two sets of narratives, which allowed the Biblical narratives to be viewed as directly applicable to contemporary spiritual experiences. The second re-contextualisation was achieved by comparing the thematic data of both sets of spiritual narratives with the definitional and conceptual modelling from selected social science research and from Schneiders’ body of work. Once more, there was considerable shared thematic material, which allowed these contemporary ways of researching and discussing spirituality to find validation in contemporary lived experience. The third re-contextualisation was achieved by comparing Schneiders’ definitional and conceptual modelling around spirituality with appropriately conducted qualitative research on spirituality. This re-contextualisation facilitated the opportunity for Schneiders’ work to be employed as practically relevant within selected social science research on spirituality.

The re-contextualisation of spirituality in terms of contemporary Australian society from the perspective of older individuals is an important research outcome. As such, it was placed in a body of research that approached contemporary definitions of spirituality from the themes that emerged from the narratives of discrete groups of individuals. Examples of this are found in Schmidt’s work on spiritual leisure where “24 co-researchers were invited to share their self-defined spiritual leisure experiences” (2005, p. i); and in Barker and Floersch where “spirituality and its complexities were captured in the narratives of this group of social work practitioners” (2010, pp. 359–360).

The re-contextualisation of spirituality was also contemporarily evidenced within the religiously framed institution of the Australian Catholic Church where it was (i) discussed using re-contextualisation approaches to re-connect with the social plurality and spirituality of Generation Y (Sharkey 2010); and (ii) acted to re-set approaches to professional development for staff members, curriculum designers and teachers (Gowdie n.d.) Sharkey’s discussion paper argued for re-contextualisation on the basis that it “promotes Catholic identity in all its particularity by means of an ongoing dialogue with the contemporary, pluralised and de-traditionalised cultural context” (2010, p. 13). This imperative to re-
contextualise concepts as foundational as “spirituality” arises as a response to significant cultural shifts. Given the lack of creedal connection in the narrated spiritual experiences of older Australians, the need for the re-contextualization of spirituality for older Australians assumes similar significance to that given to Generation Y for Australia’s Church communities.

9.6 Implications of the study and future directions

It will be recalled that the range of contexts in which this study has applicability was identified in Chapter 1. These contexts will now be employed to organise the implications of the study for further research and practice arising from the findings.

Selected social science scholarship

The implications of my study for research in selected social sciences where there is a research focus on spirituality are provided as follows.

First, recognition that the phenomenon of human spirituality modelled for older individuals is complex in thematic content, sequences and dynamics. When seeking to establish links between such phenomena as spirituality and healthy ageing, for example, researchers need to address the richness and diversity inherent in the spirituality of older individuals. Unrefined terminology reduces the causal linkages’ usefulness if this complexity remains unexamined.

Second, it is largely a futile exercise to equate spirituality with religion and this outcome supports Aird’s research (2007). Religion is one way among many to make sense of spiritual experience. Moreover, to pejoratively link orthodox religion with a “limited” person is to (i) make undeclared pre-judgements about orthodox religion and the meaning individuals who identify as orthodox Christians ascribe to the description; and (ii) to make undeclared assumptions around what makes an individual Christian “limited” – especially if limitation is linked to levels of academic education. If such arguments are not definitionally clarified when linking religion to “limited” individuals, then the research is compromised.

Third, the culturally framed nature of spirituality suggests that different cultures would express their spirituality in different ways. The 17 narrators of this study were firmly contextualised in Western culture. But given the Australian community is now a multi-
cultural one, social science research needs to account for the impact a multi-cultural Australia would have upon studies relating to spirituality in our contemporary community.

Fourth, the value of narrative methodologies in generating rich text suggests that its employment as a social science tool might be extended or at least further explored when dealing with complex issues associated with highly personal but undisclosed or hidden phenomena. Denzin saw his methodology being limited to trauma or epiphany situations. But definition was likely the problem here because not all undisclosed personal experience was trauma. For example, volunteer work in aged care would provide experiences that could be captured as narrative-rich text but these experiences may or may not be linked to personal trauma.

**Spirituality scholarship**

The implications of my study for research around spirituality as an academic discipline are outlined as follows.

First, the research findings broadly support Schneiders’ anthropological construct of spirituality. Further conceptual development suggested by this study focuses on the nature and role of iterative dynamics associated with human spirituality – especially in association with individual transformation.

Second, spirituality as an academic discipline would benefit from developing its data platform by collecting and analysing the spiritual experiences and narratives of individuals across a range of social and cultural cohorts. The internally generated rich text around spirituality from such cohorts would allow for the development and maturation of the spiritual discipline established by Schneiders and other aligned researchers.

**Scriptural studies**

The implications of my study for researchers in the field of spirituality and scriptural scholarship are outlined as follows.

First, linkages between Biblical narratives and the spiritual experiences of contemporary individuals should be re-established through appropriately conducted studies and through a wide range of communication strategies. The re-contextualisation studies of Sharkey (2010)
and Hughes (2007) together with the insights of this study in terms of the loss of creedal connection could provide a platform for this work with older contemporary Australians.

Second, further interpretations around the way Scriptural narrative employed old age as a marker for dialogue about human spirituality need to be undertaken. If Abraham’s old age was significant, what was being discussed through an “old” Moses or an “old” Zachariah? What was the significance of Christ being “young” or “without age” in terms of his manifest nature? What were the New Testament implications, if any, of John’s great age?

Third, the Old Testament provided discussion around spirituality, which was nuanced and contemporary in focus. The Old Testament does more than provide opportunities for intertextuality for New Testament scholarship. The insights around a mature and developed spirituality to be found in the Old Testament require ongoing interpretation by scholars from this perspective.

**Practice**

The implications of my study for (i) ministry and pastoral care; and (ii) aged care professionals are outlined as follows.

**For ministry and pastoral care**

First, it is necessary to recognise that ministry practices including individual access to a “quiet” or chapel-style space, weekly services, and chats are but the start of spiritual support for the older individual. The extension of spiritual engagement with older individuals occurs in a complex space, which requires a commitment to train those who work in ministry to acknowledge and support the older person’s spirituality. This should form an important stream of ministry formation programs, and ongoing development of existing ministry personnel and workers.

Second, acknowledgement is required that the spirituality of older individuals, as expressed in experiences and memories, is rich in diversity, imagery and often language. Such acknowledgment needs also to occur with recognition of the privately held nature of many individuals’ spiritual experiences. This evidence-based insight needs to inform practice.
For professionals involved in the provision of aged care

The following list of strategies for working with older individuals in terms of their individual spirituality arose from the research undertaken in my study. It is offered as a set of options for working with the spirituality of older individuals in receipt of support by aged care professionals. The selection of strategies would be contingent on the older individual client, the individual health professional, and the support being provided. Any strategy or set of strategies would always need to be contextualised in the specific location of care service provision. Given this statement of provisional applicability, the following strategies for aged care professionals were identified as a result of my research:

- Acknowledge the link between healthy ageing and spirituality.
- Work with older individuals to be focused on the present rather than focused on death and dying. This is not to deny the need for a different orientation around palliative care.
- Support the ongoing human need for maturing and developing, including both the potential for existential crisis which is attendant on chronic ill health; and the potential for deepening faith.
- Support the spiritual need for connectedness, particularly with family members and close friends.
- Support the spiritual need for connectedness with a community, expressed both as community in the context of the facility and external to it.
- Support the individual to work with their memories.
- Support the individual to work with their individual spiritual access strategies; and not to assume that access strategies are common across individuals.
- Acknowledge and support the spiritualities across different cultural groups.
- Develop strategies for providing spiritual support for older contemporary Australians – primarily from an Anglo-Celtic heritage – in the context of personal care provided by care-workers from increasingly diverse and significantly different cultural backgrounds.
- Acknowledge and support the older individual’s ongoing relationship with Nature.
- Acknowledge and support the older individual’s personal narratives and try to overcome the “hiding” of their stories because of potential social embarrassment. Instead, establish strategies whereby the storyteller’s own personhood is validated; and also where the storyteller is able to fulfil an obligation to witness the spiritual experiences (and so personhood) of loved ones – both present and passed on.
• Recognise that the provision of a “quiet” space or chapel and the weekly visits of priests and chaplains are the start of support and not the final word of support.

• Service providers must commit resources to the training of staff and to participation in research and other activities that respond to the kinds of support for the spirituality of older individuals that have just been outlined.

**Methodology**

The implications of my study for methodology are outlined as follows.

First, the bricolage or mixed methodology design employed for my research, involving the critical methodology of literary criticism and the qualitative methodology of interpretive interactionism created a dialogue space for the study of spirituality from religious and non-religious perspectives. This dialogue space has been identified as a research need by both social science and spirituality scholarship researchers; for example, Aird (2007) and Schneiders (2002, 2011).

Second, the use of interpretive interactionism in this study extended its application to theological scholarship in its relationship to spirituality scholarship. This is a methodological option for future theological research and studies.

**9.7 Significance**

This study and its findings are significant in a number of key ways. First, the research provides a major extension of publically available research and data about the specific spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australian individuals. Moreover an evidence based cohort model of spirituality has been generated from the analysis of the contemporary spiritual narratives. As a result of this new data and modelling my study is significant in the context of a number of social science research interests. Such interests include the relationship between (i) ageing and theoretical models of psychological development – including challenges to stereotypical models of decline in old age; (ii) ageing and spirituality in the context of wellness and health in old age together with associated praxis areas of social work, pastoral work, health and aged care; and (iii) re-contextualisation studies of spirituality as a phenomenon in contemporary contexts.
Second, the research significantly extends the discourse opportunities around spirituality as defined by the academic discipline of spirituality. From this perspective, the present study is significant in the context of a number of theological scholarship interests. Such interests include (i) the re-contextualisation of academic spirituality in terms of both selected social science research and the contemporary lived experience of older Australians; (ii) the comparison based on Schneiders’ definition and modelling between contemporary and selected Biblical spiritual narratives for thematic consistency; (iii) the re-contextualisation of Biblical insights in terms relevance for current experience; and (iv) the extension of Old Testament interpretation with regard to Biblical spirituality beyond that of intertextuality opportunities for New Testament perspectives on spirituality.

Third, the research is significant in the context of methodological approaches. This is because my study employed a bricolage research design to capture interdisciplinary perspectives on the complex phenomenon of spirituality. The bricolage design incorporated the qualitative approach of interpretive interactionism through which to identify and interpret the thematic content of the contemporary spiritual narratives together with a critical methodology of narrative literary criticism to interpret the Biblical narratives. Moreover, a Framework of Spirituality was synthesized from the disciplinary scholarship associated with both selected social science scholarship and scholarship from spirituality as an academic discipline. This conceptual framework was used to argue congruence between the narrated spiritual experiences of older contemporary Australians and disciplinary scholarship.

The study overall, therefore, is an important and an original contribution to the research field because of its interdisciplinary nature with regard to both conceptual development of spirituality and methodology; because it gives a contemporary voice both to the spirituality of older 21st century Australians and to the foundational spirituality of the Scriptures; and because it provides an evidence-based cohort model of spirituality generated from thematic data identified in the contemporary spiritual narratives.

### 9.8 Conclusion

Inspired by, among others, Jung (1930), Gutmann (1976) and Chinen (1985, 1986), I started conducting qualitative interviews with old people, who told about how they had perceived their lives in various phases and transitions. It was then I discovered how life was often described as a positive development involving increased life satisfaction in the context of a developmental pattern typically including a redefinition of the self and relations to other people, as well as a new way of
understanding existential questions. These informants described how they had become less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in their choice of social and other activities. A transpersonal sense of affinity with others and with earlier generations had developed, as well as a sense of being part of a whole. Informants also talked about a kind of redefinition of time, space, life and death, and an increased need for positive contemplative solitude. These changes are often misunderstood by relatives, who label them as pathological. Old mothers are thought to be depressed, lonely, lacking in activities or on the brink of some kind of dementia. However, the individuals we interviewed did not suffer from any pathological conditions. They enjoyed life and expressed great satisfaction. What I saw in these early interviews was the unfolding of a new and intriguing developmental pattern, and I decided to use the term Gerotranscendence to describe it. (Tornstam 2011, p. 168)

In the reflection on his studies that led to the theory of gerotranscendence, Tornstam describes his research in terms that also serve to encapsulate many of the findings of this study. The spiritual narratives of the older contemporary Australians reveal an engagement with a rich inner life that is approached through reflection and precious memories, yet these narratives also show that these contemporary older individuals are focused on the present and working with the circumstances with which they are presented. The older individuals who participated in this research identified their experiences in terms of experiences of spirituality. At a future opportunity one of the questions to be explored in the dialogue space that my study has identified between the social sciences and theology, should relate to the exploration of this overlap between spirituality as an academic discipline and the theory of gerotranscendence. In a similar way, this study has argued that the richness and relevance of the Biblical narratives involving old protagonists show that there are important contemporary insights to be had around Biblical spirituality and gerotranscendence, along with similar theories. For Jung, the great task of old age was that of individuation or of developing the Self or God within. It may seem to be just a grand set of words. However, respected research and theorising by scholars such as Tornstam and the narrated spiritual stories of this study’s participants show that this task of old age is evident in the everyday experiences of contemporary older Australians.

I cannot define for you what God is. I can only say that my work has proved empirically that the pattern of God exists in every man, and that this pattern has at its disposal the greatest of all energies for transformation and transfiguration of his natural being. Not only the meaning of his life but his renewal and his institutions depend on his conscious relationship with this pattern in the collective unconscious. (Jung in Van der Post 1977, pp. 216–217)
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*The highlighted cells indicate areas where the data sets and the Framework of Spirituality are not congruent.*
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES
Old age provides you with challenges and opportunities with regard your spirituality. As you get older you have to face the reality of letting things go. Some find this hard: but I don’t. Now I have the time to reflect and develop my prayer life. This time of letting go is actually one of the blessings you get.

- Participant 17
Participant 1

Participant 1 is in his mid-sixties and has recently retired from lecturing in universities both in Australia and overseas. His wife of over fifteen years also worked with him overseas; and she is a Malaysian Chinese. He has an adult daughter from a previous marriage. He is highly educated, articulate and analytical; and also has a strong sense of humour. He is also fiercely atheistic in outlook; and these “spiritual” experiences have not been shared with anyone.

Participant 1 tells his story initially like he is about to give a lecture. He has prepared notes which structure his narrative; and he has brought pictures along to illustrate certain aspects of his stories. He places his glasses on his nose (after carefully taking them from his case) and directly talks to you while referring to his notes. At first his tone is measured and reveals a well-educated British background. Then not long into his story telling things change: he becomes more animated (using his hands more); accents appear to capture a dialogue in a more lively fashion; he repeats points and/or embroiders them; and most obvious of all – his questioning and analytical mind alights upon an issue or feature of his story which he then commences to explore anew. His storytelling is an unfolding – to the listener and to himself.
Participant 1: spiritual narratives

I would like first to provide some context around the spiritual experience/s I am about to describe. Up until the age of 9 I lived in an urban environment – both in the US (Chicago) and the UK (Liverpool). The UK of the 1950s was still a war damaged and bombed out environment and many parts of the country had an overlay of poverty. Then at about 9 years old my parents upped and moved to Kent – rightly called ‘the garden of England’. Suddenly I moved from the urban and bleak to living in the middle of fields, woods and flowers: it was an incredible experience. At that time (as a 9 year old) I was allowed to spend all day in the woods enjoying its wonderful beauty and only coming home as it grew dark. So coming to the present my ‘perfect day’ involves being alone, quiet and in a natural setting. (I am painting this picture for you because it is an important link to my later “spiritual” experience.)

There are also a few further points which I would like to use to frame the experience I describe later. First, I don’t believe in “God”. I had a typical English/Anglican school religion background – routine, drab hymns and prayers. I also hold a very strongly negative view of the Catholic Church. It is also true however that later in life I attended Quaker meetings. I liked the simplicity and quiet of these Quaker gatherings; and I found the individuals involved to be genuine. Involvement in the Quaker gatherings offered me a treasured period of deep personal reflection.

Second, I have studied and practiced meditation at various times throughout my adult life. There are many ways to calm the mind; and recently I have taken up walking meditation – I am training myself to walk and meditate for approximately 15 minutes daily. This is supplemented by a sitting meditation of 30 minutes. I do this meditation routine 5 times a week.

Third, my personal outlook on life is pessimistic; and I believe that in the long term human society will implode – dragged down by the greed and moral bankruptcy of the powerful few.

So let me talk about my specific spiritual experience: an experience which was important but I must add was not life-changing. I lived for a time in Ankara, Turkey – a place which is either very hot or very cold. On one occasion I was taking an evening lecture which finally finished
around 8.30pm. It was night-time and it was pitch-black. I was both extremely tired and hungry. As I left the university building it was bitterly cold and snowing. I was absolutely alone in this place. Ahead of me the road stretched long and black - but also because of the street lighting, very bright. The drama of the moment was further heightened because of the terrain in which the road was situated. On one side of my “urban” road a sheer mountain side reared up into the darkness and on the other it fell away into a valley and into the wildness of the countryside. It reminded me of a Van Gogh painting.

By now it was much more than snowing – it was like a blizzard. The wind blew flurries of snow at you and all you could do was put your head into the wind and go for it: this combined with my tiredness and hunger conspired to make a physically a powerful experience. As I moved along the road and into the snow storm I had my earphones in and I was hearing Handel’s Music for the Royal Fireworks. (This was music written by Handel to celebrate peace after a long period of war). And the particular section of the suite I was hearing was called “Rejoicing”. In this moment I had lost all sense of the physical problems presented by walking through the snowstorm; and instead I had a great sense of relief. My backdrop pessimism dropped away to be replaced with a sense of happiness and peace. I have never felt so alive!

As an experience it was a short one – it didn’t last long; and was over in less than ten minutes. But I recognise it as a brief encounter with pure ecstasy. I have not shared this experience: I have never spoken to anyone else about it in my life.

I suppose when I first looked at this experience written down it seemed a bit ‘thin’. However on thinking about it the event does acquire a greater importance. The first thing I re-visit is that brightly lit road: in particular I focus on the light and it strikes me how important is this light! The road I am travelling is brightly lit but everything on both sides is pitch black: it is a scene from a painting – one which captures vastness and places me as a small individual walking down a thin ribbon of light, slowly making my way through the darkness. I am in a physical metaphor for life: I am in Nature, in art, and in the symbolic moment - all in this compressed experience.

I think about that moment in the freezing snow storm and I am compelled to look deeper into it. I see my life as very middle-class, very predictable and very safe: it has few challenges. But I also know that this safe predictability is a myth: I am in one sense very
vulnerable – my middle-class life can be fragile and taken away from me at any time. And here in this moment I felt the vulnerability of my life – because here absolutely alone, I was being confronted with the raw power of Nature and its forces.

So why is this moment a spiritual experience for me? I suppose I believe that vulnerability can be a spiritual thing and we need to be reminded of this more often. We need to recognise that the humanly constructed material world can be a trap – the Buddhist veil of Maya image if you like. I also think the spirituality of the experience is evidenced in its intensity. Time had stopped; I was in a state of ecstasy – I was relieved of thought and from care. I was taken out of the middle class life.

Finally, I believe it was a spiritual experience because I simply had to accept it. It was beyond any power I had to change or shape it. I was removed from the typical Western mind-set of “you can do anything”; and I had to accept myself in Nature as a “grace” – I was such a tiny thing in the midst of unimaginable power. The spiritual moment is not “on demand”: it comes to you and you accept it – it is grace.

Sometimes I can capture an echo of the snow storm experience. For example, I find an echo of it when I go bird watching in the early morning. Bird watching requires observation skills, patience and a preparedness to be disappointed or to be grateful for small outcomes – such as a common bird being found in an unusual environment. Bird watching asks you to be humble – to be actively quiet whilst maintaining a sense of humility. It can provide me with that spiritual experience’s sense of oneness with Nature; and with accepting small or no outcomes in the face of Nature. But even bird watching is only an echo of that one time on a dark night in a blizzard. And I suppose that is one of the long term effects of my spiritual experience – it helps you identify an echo and reflect upon it. It can provide relief from my “rationale brain”: because once you think too much about it, reason kicks in and I am separated from my ecstatic experience.

Again I return to my childhood in Kent. Before I went to Kent with my family my world was grey. Liverpool was cold and grey; everyone wore drab clothes; women wore scarves of muted tones to cover their hair (and to show that they were respectable). I was visually starved in this colourless world - but Kent and its countryside opened up a visual, colourful world. This vibrant colour in part was Kent’s power for me. An aunt had bought me a book called “The Observer’s Guide to Flowers”. I loved that book with all its colourful images and
here in Kent it came alive for me. Kent also opened up the world of nature walks. I walked all over the English countryside; and when walking I loved seeing the light dappling through trees. Again I enjoyed being alone, having time for reflection, and satisfying at the same time my sense of curiosity and love of something new.

I’ve brought some pictures along to try and visually capture something of the feeling I experienced in the particular snowstorm moment and some of its other Nature located echoes. Here are some paintings by Caspar David Friedrich: the first one, ‘View of a Harbour’ shows ships on the water in the stillness between day and night. For me sunrise and sunset are particularly special times of the day; and the painting, Evening’ captures a great sense of quiet and contentment. It is really a sky-scape incorporating at the same time a vast open landscape. When I place myself in this picture it is just me and Nature. The last Friedrich is called “Monk by the Sea”. It is again a vast sky-scape/landscape in which the tiny figure of a monk can just be seen. When I look at this picture I situate myself in it as part of the landscape – situated in its earth and sky vastness. (Sometimes at sunset in my garden at home there seems to be a sense of peacefulness in the sky. It is different to the calm of the walking meditation; and I like it a lot. My garden at home also captures light in its greenery – yet another way light in Nature engages me.) My final picture is a Turner called “Steamer in a Snowstorm”. What draws you into this swirling infinity is the energy it mysteriously generates. Nature at times lets you access this energy as well as my treasured sense of quiet and serenity.

In talking about this mix of serenity and energy I recall another example of when I have experienced this. Many years ago now I used to go diving; and I was quite an experienced diver with around 42 dives under my belt. Essentially I enjoyed diving because of the experience of weightlessness and being a tiny thing in the vastness of the ocean.

On this particular occasion I was going diving on a large dive ship with many other divers. The weather had been very stormy and smaller dive ships were being refused the right to leave the harbour. However, because the dive ship was so large we were granted permission to leave the harbour and go on the dive. This was not a good decision. The ship struggled through the mountainous waves – rising and flopping down into watery gulfs in an alarming manner: but we continued out to sea and down the coast to our dive site. The divers all entered the rough sea and we did our dives. But as I (along with the other divers) surfaced after the dive was complete I found myself caught up in a huge wave motion generated by
the very rough conditions. The wave motion carried me high up to a peak from where I could see our dive ship – a long way in the distance; and I could see the other divers all strung out in a random bobbing pattern between me and the ship. The wave motion then forced me down into the sightless depths of its trough; and so it continued until I could get my bearings to swim to the guide line in order to pull myself back to the ship – to swim to that little rope which was your frail hold on safety. All I was in that moment was a tiny bobbing nothing in the vastness of water. And yet I felt no fear – only exhilaration! I was overwhelmed by a sense of “wow” – feeding off the energy of the waves whilst located in a completely unpredictable environment.

(I guess this is the kind of energy and elation which surfers wax mystical about; and soldiers and firefighters experience and use to confront danger or death; and which engenders the bonding – even love – which forges such individuals into tight knit groups.)

Well, I will share one final (to me unexplainable) incident – whether it’s spiritual or not I’ll leave it for you to consider. I was in Malaysia with my Chinese family. Now Chinese families routinely consult fortune tellers when they are considering matters of importance for themselves; and my Chinese family had decided they needed to consult with a particularly famous fortune teller called Master Chin. You must remember that my Malaysian family takes such advice as gospel – they believe in it absolutely.

In any case I along with the rest of the family go to consult with Master Chin. I am dressed “down” as a tourist; and I look at Master Chin who is dressed in a certain way and does certain ritual things. I am in that moment incredibly sceptical of all this “rubbish”. Anyhow it is soon my turn and because it has been paid for I present for my session with Master Chin. So he begins by telling me that I am a highly educated person – I am baffled with this because I don’t believe my outfit or non-verbals could have revealed that fact. He then proceeds to tell me “either you are an actor, or you wanted to be one.” I was stunned – I had always wanted to be an actor and had seriously considered taking up the profession when I was at university. I have never spoken to ANYONE about this. Again let me emphasise this – I was stunned. I came away from that session with Master Chin with a much broader view of these things. It was a revelation that had just come out of nowhere: a great thought provoking experience.
Participant 2

Participant 2 is a recently retired woman with adult children and with five grandchildren. She has been married and divorced twice; and she is currently working through the adjustments associated with retirement. She tells her stories with the comment that these spiritual stories are not shared with friends or even family – although a long time ago she confided in one friend about them. She still feels that her family and friends would think she is “nuts” if she told them of her experiences.

Participant 2 tells her story very directly and in a lively tone. Her stories move in and out of each other as images and issues crop up. Participant 2 appears “on the alert” in her environment which physically is modern and well organised: but when telling her story she checks to see if you are comfortable or whether she can get you something. She also will tell you at the same time that she can “feel” in the present moment protective wings about her. As a story teller Participant 2 brings together a number of “tonal” streams (dramatic moments; edgy uncertainties); but her primary story telling style is a no-nonsense one – she is telling it as it is.
Participant 2: spiritual narratives

Up until I was seven I was raised by my maternal grandparents in a family which was conservatively Catholic. I almost never interacted with other children and so became an isolated child who had no idea about babies or how children fitted into a family. When I was seven my grandmother died and I went to live with, and be cared for, by my uncle and his wife. I stayed in this family until the third year of my nursing studies.

My uncle’s wife was both verbally and physically abusive to me (and to a lesser extent, to my uncle): and on at least two occasions I was beaten so severely that I lost consciousness. My uncle took refuge in the routines and rituals of the Catholic Church: my spiritual path however was even at this stage of my life quite different to that offered by orthodox Catholicism. For example, I experienced premonitions: I dreamed that my aunt was going to stab my uncle – an event which occurred not long after my dream.

I had always believed in “God” – and I still do. Since an early age I have at times dialogued with a positive presence which I identify as “God” – but a God which I know would be a heresy for my conservative Catholic family. Nevertheless I have always felt protected – always had a sense of angels at my shoulders; and while I say I feel them the sensation is more like hands close and hovering above my shoulders. At times I am visually aware of these presences as well as feeling them. Given the difficulties and stresses of my life from an early age to the present I doubt I would have survived without this spiritual protection.

A specific spiritual experience associated with protection from this early period of my life involves literally escaping death. I was driving a friend home after having had dinner. At a point in the drive I was held up by traffic lights for what seemed an especially long time. As I waited other cars sped on. By the time I reached the next set of lights there was a horrific traffic accident with bodies and blood everywhere. Had I not been stopped for a few minutes by those lights it is almost inevitable that I would have been part of the carnage which was now in front of me. Confronted by this situation my sense of being protected and having been saved was particularly strong. I still get goose bumps when I think of it now; and I definitely remember this incident as being consistent with my earliest senses of spiritual protection.
For the next period of my life I was firmly involved in my marriage, rearing my children and working to build the family’s assets. My husband was closed to the idea that I could participate in furthering my education let alone be open to the thought that I might seek to explore any personal spirituality. The upshot of this period was that I suppressed anything “spiritual” in my life. Although even in this “closed” period there were a few spiritual events. First, during this period I thought on several occasions I could sense my grandmother about me; and second, I astonished a friend by looking at an old black and white photo of her as a five years old wearing a favourite dress and telling her the colours and patterns of her dress.

There is however one other strange or spiritual experience from this period. It involves two incidents. Our first Queensland home was in Mt Warren Park. I was in the kitchen with my daughter one day when we heard footsteps on the carpet coming up from the front door; and then as clearly as you do every day, we heard a cup being placed on the kitchen bench. There was no-one else in the house apart from my daughter and me. Sometime later I worked in real estate and had reason to visit a property on which lived a clairvoyant. She told me, “You’ve lost a child – we call him Damian. He’s in the spirit world with us. But he’s also around you – I can tell from your aura.” I had indeed lost a child (but I would never call a child Damian – I don’t like the name.) I did tell the kids about this – and when I got home I placed my 15 year old son in front of the mirror and concentrated on checking for our auras. As I looked there were three auras – My son’s (he was 15); one between my son and I (this ‘lost’ child was older than my 15 year old son); and my own aura. So I think this was my lost child and perhaps he was the source of the strange footsteps on the carpet.

(I am nonetheless sceptical about clairvoyants generally. I think their spiritual connection is not always present or indeed particularly strong. And I suspect that they do become emotionally exhausted and the gift is somehow extinguished.)

As I said earlier, this period of my life was given over to my marriages. Eventually my second marriage failed because my husband left me to establish another relationship: and the devastation and trauma of this marriage breakdown combined with a serious fall led to major physical health and depression consequences for me.

As I struggled to re-set my life two major events shaped my life – first, I enrolled at Griffith University and pursued with difficulty university studies. Here I had the good fortune to connect with a thoughtful and skilled lecturer in psychology who mentored me though my
time at university; and who helped re-build my confidence and lend a positive orientation to my life. Second, I started to actively re-connect with my spiritual nature. This latter reconnection started to take place before I commenced my university studies.

The re-awakening of my spiritual connections came in a number of ways. Through a casual decision to have a Tarot reading (and through responding to the accuracy of the reading) I was encouraged by the reader to undertake sessions in meditation. These meditations were to have (and continue to have) a great impact upon me emotionally and as reflective experience.

My meditation sessions were taken in a group setting with participants who largely came from a psychic background. Our teacher helped us develop our meditation techniques – especially visualisation. I also use music in the background to help me enter into the meditation. Typically we would visualise following a path into a rainforest where we would identify locations in the rainforest to deal with our personal life issues. The experience was very intense for me – I could hear the rainforest birds, I could smell the early morning odours and the dampness under foot and I could hear and feel the leaves as I walked upon them. Almost always water is involved in these visualisations – perhaps I find myself by a pool or waterfall. (I love being by water and sometimes in my mind I take myself off to the beach!)

During these meditations individuals (including myself) would also pursue our own personal journey within our meditation. I also learned to visualise myself bathed in a white light to protect me from negative forces and spirits. (It is a practice I still use when I meditate. I certainly believe in evil as a spiritual force and I am genuinely terrified of the Devil.)

One particular and highly significant meditation journey took me along a steep and ascending path up a mountain. Here I met a guide who appeared as an “Abraham” figure – a white robed old man with long white hair and a long flowing beard. This guide told me his name is Joseph and he was wise and “full of love”. We started a very involved conversation. What strikes me most as I remember this meeting is how emotional it was; and I recall being unable to stem my tears. Joseph told me I had climbed many difficult mountains but that I had one final mountain yet to climb. I often return to this statement by Joseph and wonder “what is the ‘final mountain’ I must still climb?” I remain closely attached to Joseph who to me is a real and living being and would like to seek him out again.
My meditations introduced me to other spirit guides. There was a small Japanese man called Mr Kosimoto (my first spirit guide), and two other guides – one called David and one called John who looked like Sean Connery (but Sean Connery as he is today – grey haired and with a small naval beard, and of course very handsome). All these guides wore white, had blue eyes (even Mr Kosimoto), and possessed “soft”, gentle features. I remember having conversations with all of them.

Sometimes however my meditations could be confusing. On one occasion I was meditating whilst sitting on a wide veranda with high rafters. In my meditation I saw a young man in his early twenties flying around the rafters. He was small (the size of a 12 year old) and dressed in a white robe: his name was David also (but he was not the same David as my other spirit guide). He said something to me but I can’t remember what it was. I was so taken aback by his sudden appearance that I called a neighbour over to check. She laughed and said, “No – you’re not crazy.” But she couldn’t see anything.

One sad thing about these meditation mediated meetings was that at the time I could not remember any of this. This was due to the fact that during my university study years (and so during the worst period of my depression and poor health) I had short term memory loss due to an accident. This short term memory loss applied both to the tasks of everyday living (e.g. not being able to recognise my son as I came across him unexpectedly on the street) and to those associated with my emerging reconnection to a spiritual path. It is only as time has passed and I have regained my health that the memories of meeting with these spirit guides have returned.

There was one other particularly striking spiritual experience which occurred to me during this time. As a sort of a dare or joke, some friends and I decided to have a séance. I marked the table up and placed the glasses as appropriate around the table. The séance quickly became very dramatic as the glass moved wildly around the table and then appeared to fly off the table and smash violently on the floor. My friends and I quickly abandoned the séance. Not long after this I kept getting the sensation that there were a lot of people trying to talk to me. In fact on one evening in particular I was certain there were 50 or more people in my kitchen – all talking but I couldn’t make out what was being said. When I went into the kitchen, there was no-one in it. At my next meditation session I questioned one of my spirit guides about the voices. The advice was that these voices were worried about the séance
potentially allowing a dangerous spirit into my environment. I have not engaged in séances since this time and I have not had the sensation of many voices around me.

I have had other occasions when I seem to have had a lot of voices around me talking together. A clairvoyant told me that this is the spirit world trying to talk to you but you’re not letting them through. So I have taught myself to tell them to quieten down and to reassure them that I want to talk to them. This seems to help.

As I come into my more recent set of spiritual experiences these tend to cluster around my introduction to and use of Reiki therapy – almost uniquely around one especially spiritual therapist. The most powerful example of this arises from a close association I formed with a work colleague called Michael. Michael was a large powerfully built man of Maori ethnic origin. Michael was also a professional man who was happily married – and his wife and I were (and remain) good friends. The connection between us was best characterised as that found with close siblings - with Michael being very protective of me and my circumstance. It was a great loss to me when Michael was taken with cancer after an 18 month struggle.

Michael’s loss and in particular, work related stress made me feel that my head was so “crowded” I couldn’t think straight. I eventually ended up consulting a Reiki therapist who told me that there was a very large figure at my shoulder protecting me. I personally identified this figure with Michael; and on my way home from the session I felt a hand firmly touch down on the top of my head as if to make me aware that he (Michael) was with me. Other incidents where this spiritual connection to Michael became evident was during sessions where first, my long dead grandfather complained to the Reiki therapist that he was being blocked in his efforts to talk to me by a large male individual; and second, a larger group of spirits complained to the therapist about the same blocking character. I sense strongly that this is Michael continuing to protect me. Michael has told me through the Reiki therapist that I should leave his photo out and talk with him. I am however careful about leaving his photo out because of people (including my daughter) “taking it the wrong way”. I do take his photo out every now and then and talk with him.

Overall however, the period of time covered by my working was largely without spiritual experience. I was too stressed and living in fear about my future to have a clear enough mind to engage my spiritual self. I wasn’t “clear enough for things to come through”.
I did continue to work – admittedly on a sporadic basis – with the Reiki master and medium “J”. She is a very spiritual person and a Christian – although not an orthodox one. “J” has encouraged me to take up my meditation work again; and I feel that I am once more ready to return to my spiritual path. As well I feel now that I am older – and I suppose have the time and opportunity – I can revisit my spiritual experiences and try to remember more about them and what they mean. I can use my spiritual experiences and recollections to approach my here and now life more positively. Even now I feel that there are “angel wings around me”. I think perhaps they are people who have died and are looking after me; I think they are reassuring me that everything will be ok.
Participant 3

Participant 3 is in her nineties and cuts a small and wiry figure. She is a diabetic; but she moves around the aged care complex in which she now lives with relative ease. She is even able to undertake small shopping walks up to the local shops where she gets items for herself and others in her area. Her husband died some while back. Her children, grandchildren and other close relatives are spoken about with an obvious but not overbearing pride in their achievements.

Participant 3 tells her story seated in a chair surrounded by what seem to be projects in various states of development. She shifts and moves in this chair frequently as she tells her story; and this shifting appears to come more from restlessness rather than from any discomfort. Her voice is somewhat deep and she speaks in a definite tone. Participant 3 will often pause in her story to make sure the listener has understood what is being said – and (probably) whether the listener is paying appropriate attention!
Participant 3: spiritual narratives

My whole spiritual life turns on one incredible experience. That experience changed my life forever and it’s the reason I became a Christian in early adulthood. But I need to give you some background as to how I came to this point in my life.

Let me say from the outset that I came from a household which completely rejected any idea of a Christian God. My father in particular would have none of it. As a child I didn’t think much about this – and I certainly didn’t understand how my father had come to this Godless position.

Looking back I can now see how it probably happened. My grandmother and great grandmother were strict Presbyterians – originally from Scotland. They were devout: grace was said at meal times and (inexplicably to me) there was no sewing allowed on Sundays. “If you go to heaven,” my grandmother would say “you’ll have to pick the stitches out with your nose!” I did ask questions at times about what all this meant – but my father would not answer. My grandfather on the other hand would say to my father “Answer her!” but it remained unexplored territory as far as my father was concerned.

My father’s hostile stance to God was probably grounded in a number of things. To begin with everyday life for these families was grindingly hard. One family member for example, had damaged his hand in an accident down the mines. Gangrene set in and progressively they amputated his hand, his arm up to the elbow, his remaining stump up to the shoulder - and still it progressed. So one day he went to the pub and got blind drunk, staggered up to the horse shed at the back of the property and shoved a handful of fox bait into his mouth. He was soon found by another family member who raced down to where my mother and I were in the house. “I’ve just found Pa dead in the horse trough with this in his hand.” My mother who was a bush girl forcefully brushed his hand and its contents away into shrubs. She recognised it for what it was – cyanide.

My father too had been a miner but an undiagnosed burst ulcer had destroyed part of his stomach, and he spent the rest of his life as a sick man always in chronic pain. He was only able to earn a living because his miner mates all chipped in and bought him a truck for delivering coal. From my father’s perspective all this misery made him question the very idea of a Christian God.
So I grew up really without God. I was a “Daddy’s girl” and I loved him dearly and we always shared a very strong bond. I didn’t play with dolls – rather my little wheelbarrow was used to chauffer the cat and chickens about. And I was determined from a very early age to be successful. My mind was set on becoming a doctor – this seemed a more than achievable goal as I was smart and hardworking. I did all my studies, passed my exams, and had volunteered in the Red Cross Nursing Section. Everything was ready to go – I only needed to turn 18 to gain entry to medical school. Then before my 18th birthday World War II broke out. I was conscripted for wartime work; and instead of going to medical school I found myself contributing to the war effort as a nurse.

And that’s how I come to my life changing spiritual experience.

I was working as a nurse in the Army Section of Long Bay Hospital. One of my closest friends here was a fellow nurse called Marion, who happened to be the daughter of a former Anglican priest. One particular night after lights out the Matron put an urgent call around the hospital. All staff, nurses and doctors were to present themselves down at the waterfront. A hospital ship had been torpedoed and - after managing to somehow evade being finished off-it had limped home to Sydney.

I cannot describe to you the horror which met us when we boarded this hospital ship. Even today as I speak about it I want to shut my eyes and cry. Everywhere there were dead boys, dying boys, sick boys. The doctors were flat out sectioning the dead, the dying, those about whom they were unsure and those who could be saved. They gave as much comfort and drugs to ease the pain as they possibly could.

There was one particular boy that the doctors decided could go either way. Marion and I were assigned to his care: we had to focus on him. His face was half blown away and his body seemed to be in shreds: no-one including me believed he would survive the night. We cleaned him up as best we could; and the boy came to and looked up at Marion and me and asked, “Will you pray for me?” I was stunned: and confused because being an atheist I had no concept of prayer in this situation. But Marion knew exactly what to do. Putting her arms around both of us she prayed for him. Once more he slipped in and out of consciousness. When he awoke again he spoke with enormous effort through his horribly disfigured face, “I want you to thank God for saving me.”
Half his face was gone; he had lost one eye; doctors would later have to amputate one leg to his knee and one arm to his elbow – there seemed no way for him to be saved. But we prayed for him. More painkillers and the night wore on. Marion stayed with him all through the night and when he came to in the early hours of the new day he thanked Marion. Marion said to me, “This boy is going to live. This boy’s faith will pull him through.” Some days passed and the boy still held on; and then some weeks and he was still with us. Other boys were dying around us like flies – but this boy seemed to be a special case. He kept on coming around; and we – especially Marion – cared for him. It took 2½ years for him to heal and be restored to living an everyday life. And 3½ years later – almost to the very day – he married Marion.

That boy’s faith made me realise that there was something greater than anything I could imagine at work in human life. The power of prayer is something wonderful.

After this I became confirmed in the Christian faith; and have remained a committed Christian from that time on. I shifted to welfare work from nursing: but in every case I have tried to respond to a person’s need – regardless of their social condition or physical presentation. I absolutely believe in the power of prayer. I pray to God for the strength each day to do work which is practically helpful – even here in this place I still try to be a help. Without wanting to sound weird I believe that Destiny places you in a situation, but prayer directs you in how to respond.

Over the years I have had other personal experiences which I would clearly call spiritual. These have mostly involved my dear husband who died a while ago now.

My husband told me before he died that it would not be the right thing for me to live with any of the children. Nevertheless after he passed away I went and stayed in my son’s house. I was in the house one day when I heard the back door open and then saw my husband standing in the doorway. It was definitely him – he was wearing one sock up and one sock down just as he usually did. My husband looked firmly at me, slammed the door shut and then just disappeared. He was letting me know that I shouldn’t be staying with the kids!

On another occasion I was in my own home and had gone out to do some shopping. At the time I had two dogs which I left in the house while I was gone. I returned home with the shopping, opened the house and waited for the dogs to greet me as they always did. But this
time the dogs wouldn’t come to greet me: then I looked into the lounge room and saw my husband sitting in a chair. He looked at me and then his spirit (or vision) vanished up through a window. Nothing would get those two dogs to come into the lounge room for a long time! I have also had a number of spiritual experiences while living in this retirement complex. I have for example, seen my husband sitting in this chair in my room. And over the last few weeks I have slept badly because my long since departed aunt Beryl has been calling out my name. I don’t know why as yet. I often feel that there are “presences” about me; and I feel that this is comforting.
Participant 4

Participant 4 is in her eighties and currently is in a new and best practice aged care facility. She is widowed some eight years; and has five children, several grandchildren and even a couple of great grandchildren. Her family is now scattered around the country although one granddaughter still lives within a comfortable drive from her home. She is intelligent, well read and enjoys discussing concepts and exploring new ideas. Unfortunately her health – disabling arthritis – leaves her severely mobility impaired; and she still struggles with the loss of independence associated with this impairment.

Participant 4 tells her stories in a clear but soft voice which is often hesitant as if unused to telling such things: in fact she often questions during her re-counting of events as to whether she actually has a spiritual story to tell. Throughout the discussion she is often forced to reposition herself because of the pain and discomfort caused by her arthritic condition; but she refuses to allow any fussing – and also she manages to keep an ear out for movement or calls in the corridor and rooms around her own.
Participant 4: spiritual narratives

My background was that of a strict Catholic upbringing: it was conservative and all the important rites of church membership were observed – confirmation, first confession, regular attendance at mass, a Catholic school education. But even as a younger person I felt all this was too confining; and I welcomed and strongly supported the changes brought about through Vatican II. I found for example that the Church’s approach to contraception and its love of too many rules and regulations could in fact end up wrecking marriages rather than supporting them.

After my children left home – in the seventies - I no longer engaged with my Church for some years. However, I do not regret my Catholic upbringing. I am pleased that I have a faith; and that it has provided me with a philosophy of life. There is also a sense that it has provided a base for one of my daughters’ spirituality. She is very New Age: she is interested in Buddhism and has a guru – and is accepting of all things spiritual.

For myself I think I am a “helping” type of person; and so I see myself as engaging in a practical Christianity. I have always associated with Christianity’s moral framework and principles – and I still do.

When the children left home I went through my own mid-life crisis. There I was middle class and middle aged; and when I asked the question “who am I?” my response was “not a mother”, “not just a wife.” I had trained as a nurse at the Mater before I was married and although it was excellent training I did not return to nursing. Instead I spent the next 14 years as a counsellor and team member in the Welfare Section of Lifeline. Sometimes when I was going to, or returning from, a late night roster I would ask myself “what the hell are you doing this for?” And the answer really was found in a sort of selfishness: I got more from this work than I ever gave.

The people I worked with a Lifeline at this time were wonderful human beings – genuinely both compassionate and humble. So when you worked with those who came to Lifeline seeking assistance and with those who cared for them, it taught you a lot about yourself. It gave you a lot of insight into compassion. I read a great deal about the backgrounds and needs of our Lifeline clients and about ways we could help. But there were occasions when I
put the phone down and was completely unsure as to whether I had helped or where in
desperation the person to whom I had just spoken would go.

There were even times when you accepted the strangest ways to help someone. For
example, there was one man who actually lived in the Lifeline Clothing Drop-Off Box around
from our office. He lived there for some time; and the people from Newspaper House nearby
would give him food. That is how this man was supported.

One of the Lifeline managers there during my time was a Methodist minister. He was the
nicest, most humble person. I felt that that time working at Lifeline was a time spent working
with truly Christian people. When I left Lifeline I worked for a year with the Smith Family;
and then I worked for another year with the Queensland Women’s Historical Society.

In terms of other spiritual moments I believe that I could almost feel that sense of spiritual
connection to place we know our ancient aboriginal peoples have. I experienced this on a
Central Australia trip to Uluru. The Rock is so huge; and it suddenly is just there. During the
day it changes colour and shadows move evocatively through its mounds and crevices: it is
such an ancient and powerful presence.

I suppose another important spiritual experience arises from the time of my husband’s
death. It was a terrible time for me and our children. But my daughter – my spiritual
daughter – was driving home after her father had just passed away with the window of her
car open. She felt an unusual breeze pass over her and clearly heard her father’s voice say
“It’s over.” It was as if he was passing on a sense of relief that the passing over was
complete. She felt greatly comforted by this experience: and when she told me I too felt a
sense of comfort.

And now since the death of my husband I have had to deal with the challenges of old age:
loved ones dispersed around the county, increasingly loss of mobility, pain and the daily
challenges of remaining independent and engaged. It’s hard to keep faith when you are old.
There are so many things to depress and to defeat you – the loss of dignity having people
shower you, the confronting reality of individuals with dementia sharing your life, the
wrench when loved ones depart back to their own (now separate) lives. If there is a
particular spirituality in old age it must lie in the strength to remain responsible for ourselves
and in our focus on keeping ourselves present in life.
Participant 5

Participant 5 is in her late seventies; she has four daughters and several grandchildren although her husband of over fifty years is recently deceased. Participant 5 is a realistic, competent and independent individual. Although experiencing some ill health in recent times she is still committed to her volunteer work; and to working positively for her family. The spiritual stories she shares are viewed as highly personal stories but ones that have been told to close family members – daughters and a very close cousin.

Participant 5 tells her story in a voice and manner which is clear and precise. Her voice is also gently accented to reflect a well-educated and socially well positioned background. There is considerable thoughtfulness placed upon words and description of events; yet nonetheless there is clearly openness and plain talking in the story telling. At times in the story telling Participant 5 will pause and divert to another point of information to provide context or clarity for one of her stories. Sometimes she diverts from the flow of her story to enjoy a humorous moment; and these moments are accompanied by a deep cheeky laugh which can often surprise given the calm measured flow of her narrative.
Participant 5: spiritual narratives

I have had three striking experiences in my life which I believe could be offered as spiritual experiences.

My first experience was as a ten year old child (around 1941/1942). My parents had been advised that I should have an operation to deal with troublesome 6 year old molars. Consequently I was listed for the operation and on the day put under an anaesthetic. Unfortunately I was given a double dose of the anaesthetic (chloroform) which for a small child was potentially fatal. My experience was however one of great beauty. I experienced a wonderful light coming somehow from the other side of a tunnel. I found myself on the sand at Frankston where we went for holidays at the time and I was using my small beach spade to dig my way through to this marvellous light. I just remember digging and digging – in the end I called to my older brother Kenny to come and help dig through to the light. He called “No, Anna, come on back.” – and I did come back. But the overwhelming vision was that of the most beautiful light at the end of a tunnel.

I told my mother about the experience but I don’t recall any response she made about it: and it was only much later in life when I read Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ work that I gained an insight into this event - an event that is situated on the edge where life and death meet.

My second spiritual experience involved the birth of my third daughter in 1959. The day and evening leading up to her birth had been like a French farce. My waters had broken earlier in the day but were not recognised as such by my husband; early morning contractions created havoc as a sleepy husband and two confused small daughters were organised into the car for what seemed like an endlessly long car drive into the city and the hospital. The baby’s head started to appear and I pushed it back – but far short of the hospital I actually delivered my own baby girl in the car. Around me the confusion continued – disorganised husband and small daughters, a complaining nurse more worried about the noise we were making than about me or the baby. But for me it was the most beautiful experience of my life – to deliver my own child. I felt God was with me – this was a total conviction; the night was so clear and the stars shone like crystal points. There was such beauty in this moment.

The third experience comes from a time in the 1980’s when my cousin Claire was dying of cancer. We were very close having grown up more like sisters than cousins. I was in the small
church of St Stephens, Mt Waverley – where my grandparents had worshipped and where in fact my grandfather had been baptised. I was there in the empty church praying for my cousin.

There, as I prayed for Claire I saw in the church my Nan, Pa and my father – all passed away many years earlier. There were also a number of others present but they were unknown to me. As I think of the moment it is clear that I could see these individuals because I could see (and can still recall seeing) their faces.

I visited Claire and told her of my experience in the church. Neither of us thought it was “unreal”; we both accepted that it had happened. Claire simply asked me if “so-and-so” (a girlfriend who had died years before) had been there - but since I was not acquainted with this individual I could not give her an answer.

So these three experiences would be my most obvious spiritual stories. However I believe my life has been spiritual in a number of other ways also.

I have always tried to live my life in a way which follows Christ’s message of fellowship and responsible behaviour. I am I think a practical Christian and I try to use my skills in the context of community and parish volunteering. I relate very much to the character and life model of Christ (and I sometimes wonder if “God” is cross with me because I tend to find Christ easier to be with than “God”.)

I might also add here that the sort of volunteer tasks I undertake are similar to those done by one of my older brothers – neither of whom has any time for churches or religion!

My brothers also don’t relate to concerns about dying. I do, and have organised for my ashes and those of my husband to be placed alongside those of my parents in the one columbarium. This final closeness of our ashes is important to me and perhaps reflects another aspect of my personal spirituality – that of a sense of the ongoing chain of being which we carry on and forward from generation to generation. Family and family linkages are an important part of who I am and how I view the world.

And finally I suppose this sense of ongoing generational connection is why I find certain small churches are spiritual places. It is because these small local churches are where grandparents
worshipped, where parents were married, and where my childhood was spent and so on. Even when I went overseas and entered the many kinds of churches and cathedrals there, it was almost always the small, plain and intimate places that spiritually spoke to me. I remember them so vividly: St Margaret’s in Edinburgh, St Francis’ Chapel in Assisi, and the Medici Chapel in Florence.
Participant 6 sees himself as a typical “Australian bloke” in his late sixties. He has undertaken tertiary studies in arts and science and is very widely read. He has had several significant relationships in his adult life which have each extended over a 10 year or longer period; and he has three adult children and four grandchildren. He is happy to share most of his experiences but some are held back because they are personal rather than because they are “spiritual”.

Participant 6 tells his story initially with his eyes firmly fixed on a prepared set of rough notes: he uses these rough notes to get himself settled into his narratives and to provide a clear and logical structure. Once into his stories P6 is a very emphatic story teller: he uses repetition, direct eye contact, gestures, vocal /tonal changes to underscore both points of view and moments of drama in his stories. His story telling is also laced throughout with an engaging mix of humour, irony – even sarcasm. At points in the telling where particularly personal episodes are arrived at his emotions come into play – his voice momentarily cracking and his eyes moistening. He is a skilled story teller.
Participant 6: spiritual narratives

I want to make it clear from the outset that I don’t have any religious convictions whatsoever. I am against theistic approaches to religion and I view these to be more negative than positive in a human social sense. I can however relate to a notion of spirituality which allows me to work with the awe of creation; and with the intimations we sometimes have of “something good on the other side” – something we can’t (yet) explain. However, I also accept there may be no “other side”.

So where do I start with my open approach to “the spiritual” or “spirituality”? I would like to start with the “Wow” factor – particularly the “Wow” to be found in science - in the Universe and in Nature.

If you go into my library you will find a disproportionate number of books on astronomy and evolution (particularly plants). Wallace and Mendel (a Catholic priest) are heroes of mine. Astronomy is constantly making staggering discoveries. For example scientists have just discovered an impossibly old Sun – one with a suspected different gaseous composition than that of a typical star. And some of the most beautiful images you ever see are those of the vast galaxies of the cosmos. The numbers in astronomy are astounding and are “spiritual” for me. They make me feel insignificant and in awe of it all. Perhaps that is a “spiritual” thing. Perhaps to be forced by Nature to feel humble is a spiritual thing in itself.

Another example of this which I have experienced came about when on a trip to the near Arctic Circle. About fifteen years ago my partner and I were visiting Iceland. We were lucky one night to observe the Aurora Borealis in the sky north of Reykjavek. This was an ultimate Wow factor for me: the green illumination and the fact of the staggering physics behind it. The Aurora Borealis is created by that most ancient of all physical phenomena – the solar wind. The lights come about because of its involvement with the polar magnetism. This was an ultimate feeling: the visual and the science. My partner said she remembers me talking half the night about the physical phenomenon which is the solar wind. Yet as stated what I was seeing was simply a natural phenomenon with its accompanying science. Maybe our whole universe in itself is spiritual and it is merely when we are shaken by its beauty to connect with it genuinely closely that we see that aspect of it?
I find the evolution of plants similarly fascinating. I can almost feel a natural high when I experience being near plants – smelling them, feeling their textures, seeing the light play through them and thinking of the complexity of photosynthesis. (It’s a bit like that episode in Wind in the Willows where Rat and Mole come across Pan – the old Nature God.) And tied in with this is in fact an interest in Paganism – the old religions of the Earth. I still keep a record of the solstices and equinoxes and love reading pagan legends about them. As a child, I lived near water and was always aware of and followed the tides. Also as a child I would track the movement of the Sun by tracing the path of its shadow on the wall of my bedroom. I have the strong memory of my mother asking me what I was doing marking the wall and when I told her she understood the value of my efforts. She later told my father who set up a marking template to make it easier for me to continue my Sun tracking. But I am not a crazy Pagan running around in my Druid’s outfit – although I do have a Green Man mask hanging in a garden break out area! (I also like the fact that most pagans in Western societies when meeting to discuss issues often meet in a pub!)

But again I must stress – I don’t see a “God” in this awe of the Universe. I clearly separate “God” from any discussion of the “spiritual”. This is an important issue with me. And even here my “spiritual” experiences are viewed sceptically because I believe in time we will have scientific explanations for them. I can give you an example from a story told by my old maternal grandfather. My grandfather was an old sailor who as a young man lived through the transition period where seamanship shifted from superstition to science, and from partial sail to steam power. He had been on a ship where they had been subject to the phenomenon of St Elmo’s Fire. Before it was understood as charged electricity acting on the mast St Elmo’s Fire was seen superstitiously as a bad omen – a sign of bad spirits. He sailed with some old sailors who would not go up on deck when it was occurring. So I still think that much of what is seen as “spiritual” today will one day be able to be understood in scientific terms.

And again to play the devil’s advocate – I once had a near miss spiritual experience. About 10 years ago I was driving up to a NSW town. I was in the car alone and had passed through rather isolated country heading north. It was a dark night – there was no illumination. Suddenly I became aware of a blinding light apparently following me then moving up beside me about 100 metres away. It moved upfront, then behind and away from me. I stopped the car and the strange light turned out to be a chap on a motor bike hooning around a field. Had I not stopped I may well have been left with the belief I had seen paranormal lights.
On the other hand I do have a heightened visual dreaming capacity. I always dream in colours of red and black – always. And special dreams have great clarity and vividness. Some dreaming appears to be triggered by things I hear as I am either waking or dropping off to sleep – very often triggered by the bedside radio clock. Often I am a voyeur looking down on events from above – for example, I recently viewed the Syrian conflict in such a dream. Sometimes I move beyond a voyeur and make an emotional connection to the events I am viewing in the dream. For example I found myself in the courtroom of the Daniel Morecombe trial; and I saw the distress of the parents and wanted to talk to them and comfort them.

My dreaming capacity has been used throughout my life as a problem solving technique. I could dream myself into the plots of stories and work out approaches and interpretations of them. As a senior high school student I went in a dream to talk to Gregor Mendel in order to clarify something in his theories I had not understood. This dream did indeed help clear up some study questions. More recently after my mother died I naturally needed to deal with her estate and the associated paperwork. My mother had told where she had left important documents in her house but there was one set of papers I could not find. Using my dreaming technique I triggered a dream to find out where Mum would have left these particular documents. The dream gave me an insight and sure enough when I woke up and looked in the place suggested by my dream the papers were there. I still believe that the answers to why these experiences happen will be found in brain chemistry and simply allowing the brain in a rested state to sort things out.

I have also had a number of experiences which may be described as “spiritual” – although most probably have an everyday explanation behind them – like my motor bike lights!

First, a friend and I travelled overseas on a brief holiday. We had been moderately drinking earlier in the night but on returning to my room I felt especially hot. I turned on the air-conditioner, took a soft drink from the fridge and sat in a chair whilst overlooking the river estuary. As I sat there the room seemed to change. The scenes I was viewing from the room’s window were presented with great clarity and time seemed to stop. When I came out of this reverie what had seemed like a few minutes to me was in fact almost three quarters of an hour. It was not drug induced (I have never taken drugs) and I had drunk from a sealed can. I had no sense of physical incapacity although there was this sense of a half twilight dreaming about it – although I was not dreaming because it was not in red or black. My
companion thought I might somehow have got a spiked can of drink - I think this is probably
the most likely explanation.

Second, I was sitting in a hospital room with the mother of a close friend. This lady was in her
eighties and in the last few days of her life. My friend was also in the room on the opposite
side of the bed to me. The lady was in no way delirious and had been having very lucid
conversations about such things as gardening and local gossip. Suddenly she turned to her
daughter and said “your father’s just there.” “Where?” asked my startled friend - as her
father had died five years earlier. “Just there. Just behind you. He’s there.” For her daughter
and me, her husband clearly wasn’t present: but for her he clearly was. “Well, that’s
wonderful, M,” I said and we went on with our conversation and I genuinely felt happy for
her. It was clearly a spiritual experience for her and emotionally for me as well. But I’m sure
as people approach death our brains ease our way – in short again I believe there will be a
scientific explanation for all this.

A most recent event provides my third “spiritual” experience. As an eight year old I had a
good mate –we used to play marbles and hang out at school together. Early in primary
school his parents moved to Sydney from the country town where I lived and over time we
soon lost contact with each other. Sixty years passed by and then about 12 months ago I
couldn’t get this person out of my head. I kept saying to my partner “I can’t get so-and –so
out of my mind.” There was no reason for his sudden reappearance in my life: and then he
“disappeared”. But my curiosity was stirred and I followed him up through a Google search
of a minority sports club with which I knew he and his family had had an association and with
which I guessed he might still have. What came up was a newsletter announcing his funeral.
The whole period he was on my mind was that period covering those few days before he
died. I believe he must have been going over his life and I cropped up in early childhood
memories; and somehow this triggered a remote response in me. Probably there will be a
scientific explanation for this in the future. And it is of course a fairly common phenomenon
– for example, it was reported some wives and mothers of sailors on The Perth (HMAS Perth)
were farewelled by their dead or dying loved ones. These mothers and wives “knew” about
the tragedy well in advance of formal notification by the Navy. Such stories during war time
are not unusual.

A fourth spiritual experience is provided by my old sailor grandfather – Jack. (And I believe
you can see both a spiritual and scientific approach to this story.) Before computer assisted
navigation sailors had a crucial need for accurate clocks; and there was a disproportionate number of old ex sailors who had excellent clocks. My grandfather was no exception and owned an elaborate pendulum clock that was accurate to within about 2 minutes a week – quite a special household item in the early 1950s! After lingering for a couple of days after a major heart attack my grandfather died in hospital. My grandmother had stayed at home and was there still when Jack died. At the time of the funeral a few days later she told their children that Jack’s clock had stopped around the time he died. The children weren’t convinced and one of my uncles said the clock had stopped because it had not been wound during the time my grandfather was absent from home. He wound the clock; it started to tick; and half an hour later stopped again. My grandmother repeated her assertion that the clock had “died” just like Jack. Not to be defeated by superstition my uncle took the clock to a local jeweller who diagnosed that it had been overwound; and fixed it. The clock ticked; it was returned to home; and it stopped again. My uncle took it to the jeweller once more – this time the diagnosis was that it had been damaged by the overwinding and needed a replacement part – duly the part was installed, the clock ticked, was returned home and stopped. My grandmother’s sense of vindication grew. My uncle was by now too cranky to take Jack’s clock back to the suburban jeweller, so with the help of another uncle they took the clock to a specialist jeweller in Sydney itself. This time a completely new mechanism was put into the clock; again it ticked for a short time and stopped. My uncle was by this stage quite angry as the clock had now taken a lot of time and money and was still “broken”. He returned to the city jeweller who said such clocks were “touchy” and with old clocks like this you could never be sure a new mechanism would work – oh and it was shame that the clock had been overwound to start with. There was no further explanation for the clock. Jack’s clock then passed into family myth.

My final spiritual story – and the one to which I find most difficulty in responding ‘scientifically’ concerns an event in Sydney about 10 years ago. (Again I would like to note that there were no drinks or drugs involved.)

I was sitting in the area around Central Station drinking a cup of coffee. Walking down the street and away from me was what I could only describe as a temporal anachronism. Walking with their backs to me were a woman and a very young boy. The boy was holding the woman’s hand. The woman was wearing seamed stockings (which had gone from a woman’s wardrobe forty years earlier); and although it was a hot day both the woman and the boy were wearing old fashioned woollen coats. No pedestrians were glancing at them in
view of their unusual clothes. These were styles from the fifties. I stared after the pair and immediately recognised them as my mother and me as a child – on an excursion to Sydney in the early fifties. We would have travelled via Central Station on such a trip. The boy was holding the woman’s hand exactly the way I used to hold that of my mother’s. I stood and tried to follow the pair but they soon became “lost” in the bustle of Sydney’s streets. Of all my experiences this is the one I absolutely have no answer to. It was definitely me and my mother. It is a strange one.

So what is “spiritual”? It leaves you with good feelings not bad ones? When I go to Caulfield Racecourse I get good feelings. Almost every year my partner and I go to the Caulfield Cup over the Spring Carnival. The weather is typically beautiful; the gardens are a gorgeous display of colour and greenery; and the horses are simply magnificent creatures. Added to this beauty is the fact that my Dad’s ashes are scattered near this racecourse. I know he loved me; and so perhaps that love is also what I am feeling there at this time of year.
Participant 7

Participant Seven is in her early eighties. Together with ‘the love of her life’ (her husband of over sixty years) she enjoys a close family life with their four daughters, grandchildren and extended family. She regards her spiritual experiences as “just part of my life” since she was a very small child. However she is protective of them (and their potential to make her appear “odd” to others); and throughout her life she has only shared them with a few very close individuals – in particular her late sister Margaret. She has been wary for instance of telling her daughters about them. This is a protective decision: she is reluctant for them to have to deal with the “strangeness” of the experiences.

Participant 7 tells her story settled comfortably into a low familiar chair. Her voice is soft; but she provides the character voices when her story moves into dialogue passages. She looks at you directly as she tells her story but again the tone is a gentle one. Every now and then the humour of a moment strikes her and she breaks into a throaty laugh. Her language and non-verbals are especially vibrant when she talks about her childhood and family – her grandmother, father and mother are very vivid presences.
Participant 7: spiritual narratives

I had a number of experiences as a small child which I can only describe as “spiritual”. The first event would have taken place when I was about 5 or 6. My grandparents lived in Fortitude Valley and a cousin and I were walking with my grandmother towards T C Beirne/McWhirter’s building when a man driving a horse and cart loaded with logs suddenly veered around the corner. It was clear the horse was bolting and I could see the look of terror on the face of the man in the cart. I had “seen” this all happen earlier; and I turned to my grandmother and said “How come all this is happening all over again?” I had my head tucked into her skirts: she regarded me quizzically and said it hadn’t happened “again” and wrapped her arms around me. I then thought “Oh, I must have made it all up.” But I hadn’t and this pre-visioning became part of the way I would often experience events.

(As I said I was only 5 or 6 at the time yet as I tell you about this now it is so vivid before my eyes it’s like it is visually playing out for me once again. I can now literally see the logs falling off the cart.)

A similar deja-vu experience which has stayed strongly with me occurred when I was about 8 years old. I was in the family kitchen with my parents as a violent thunderstorm raged outside. Suddenly I could “see” a woman crying at our front gate - I could “see” her crouching there. I told my father about the woman and to go and help her. My father was doubtful because there was no way I could either have heard her cries above the noise of the storm or seen her crouching by our gate. But he went outside and found the woman as I had described. “How could you hear her above the noise of the thunderstorm?” he asked me later. “I didn’t hear her. I just saw her,” was my reply.

So these kinds of events played out through my early years; and while no-one in my family bothered me about it I was concerned. It was clear that no-one else was seeing or hearing things – and yet I was. I became worried that I might be odd. I discussed these concerns with no-one (as my sister was still very young at the time). However one day the mother of one of my dear friends came to me and said “It is a gift from God – don’t ever be afraid of it.” I have no idea how she knew about my gift – perhaps she too had similar experiences. Perhaps she knew what I was feeling because she was feeling it too. But in spite of her encouragement I remained a bit afraid of my second sight and knowing. Everything could be seen so clearly – it had such clarity; but it was not explainable and I tried to suppress it. All through my
teenage years I continued to have such experiences and all through these years I tried to shut them down. I would need to acquire confidence over time before I could feel comfortable with them and accept them as a gift.

As my sister grew older we became very close and I shared my experiences with her. She was very open to them and accepting of their insights.

At 34 years old I became a severe arthritic. I moved from being a very active sportsperson to an individual with a restricted lifestyle. My sister suggested to me that I might get pain relief from attending a healing church service where the “laying on of hands” might ease my arthritic pain. I went to the service but when I was standing in the queue and saw the priest I immediately knew his laying on of hands wouldn’t help me. I knew that I would have to accept this condition; and I would have to take responsibility for controlling it. Later when asked by my sister why I had not continued with the healing service, I could answer confidently that “it’s not what God wanted me to do.”

Another important experience where I received spiritual guidance involved my sister Margaret’s cancer diagnosis. Margaret had been diagnosed with cancer 11 years before she entered the terminal period of the disease. Before receiving the advice about her terminal condition I was driving over to the hospital to see her when I became suddenly and fully aware that this was the beginning of the end. I understood that I would have to accept this and be there for Margaret to help her in her death. It was a forewarning moment; and on entering my sister’s room I could take the difficult words from her – “I know - you’ve got pancreatic cancer”. Margaret said “who told you?” I said, “oh I just knew – it’s a sisterly thing.” I still get goose bumps about that.

Margaret’s death has been a defining spiritual experience in that I haven’t lost her at all. It’s dreadful that Margaret suffered but she remains with me. I still have conversations with her; and I believe she has intervened to support our family through some major life threatening moments. First, my great granddaughter was born with a chromosomal disorder which meant medically she should not survive long after birth. The child has not only survived but met her developmental milestones – although these have been achieved much more slowly than “normal”. I fully believe that this circumstance has been the result of my sister’s intervention. Margaret is there. My granddaughter and I will often say when we’re going on a visit to the hospital or doctor’s – “one for Margaret, none for the doctors!”
Second, my eldest daughter had a massive stroke and was not expected to survive the removal of life support. It was a dreadful week. I remember sitting in the ICU in a chair and doubting that I could cope with this. But then I felt Margaret was with me saying “I am with you. You can do it”. My daughter did indeed pull through once life support was shut down and woke the next morning to tell her husband that she loved him. She also told me that while she was in her coma she had met a number of close family members – all deceased – and Margaret was among them. They had told her “it is not your turn, go back”. And she did.

I came from a warm loving family – and I still enjoy the warmth and love of my own family. As a child my Irish grandmother would wrap me up in big hugs; my father would place me on the kitchen table as barely a 3 year old and say “ready, steady, go”. I would run off the edge of the kitchen table and he would catch me in his arms, wrapping a blanket around me at the same time and putting me to bed. And the present reflects this past. Last year I fell over running to get the phone and smashed my upper humerus into 8 pieces. It has been a painful and slow recovery. My daughter from Byron Bay sent me a large soft shawl which I have used to keep warm in the early hours of the morning when I could longer bear to lie in bed with the pain – it just feels like a hug from my daughter and is one of the loveliest feelings.

This emotional memory of warmth and love merges into a spiritual experience where I feel those who were close to me still are. Often on going to sleep my Irish grandma appears and says words to the effect “hello – just checking up on you”; and then goes again. My grandmother, mother and father are often felt – even seen. I see Grandma’s face; and I have a sense of Dad’s presence. My mother was a bright button of a woman – a “force”; and I can see her face or I sometimes have the sensation of having my hair lightly patted and ran over with her hands.

I have never been taught meditation – yet it is something I’ve always done. I call it my thinking time. There are many places and times where I do this. To begin with I am an early morning riser and I spend this quiet time sitting and being open to whatever comes my way. Similarly when we go camping to our regular spot at Fingal Beach I will sit on the same rock and open my mind. Here at Fingal, looking out to sea I feel particularly close to Margaret. Margaret’s son also has the same feeling at this place: he is the only person in his generation with whom I have shared any of my close experiences with Margaret.
I should add here that I don’t actually have to be physically on the rock at Fingal Beach. I can visualise the sight so strongly that I can send myself there at any time I wish and see everything in full colour. In fact I seem to have such a strong visualisation gift that I can journey wherever or whenever I choose. (This gift also means that I am almost never constrained by time.) As a case in point I had a small growth removed from my tongue. The nurse told me to “just relax” so I went to my rock and watched the dolphins. The nurse said “where did you go?” I really can relax at any time.

Nonetheless I do prefer places such as churches – particularly those with family connections – just to sit and enjoy being there. Sitting in such places is comforting and somehow provides permission for me to be the spiritual being I know I am. I can for example remember one instance when the organist was practicing at All Saints Church. This church is particularly comforting because of family connections – as is Holy Trinity Church. These are places where I know I could talk to God. I have felt this way since early adolescence where as I’ve said much of my daily life was spent dismissing my deja-vu experiences. I have of course visited many churches and cathedrals here and overseas: it is almost always the small quiet church which engages me. I also love the Australian bush churches – all wooden and humble with a side wooden step entrance. You can feel the small close community in these churches; and when I go into them it’s easy to relate to the place. I can say “I’m here too.”

I don’t know if anyone else in the family had similar spiritual experiences or gifts. It always seemed to be just me. But I feel that my little Irish grandmother was similarly attuned – she was so full of wise sayings. And it was more than just wise sayings. My grandmother was a huge influence on the way I understand a religious person to be. She was not big on going to Church and following the Church calendar. Rather she created a community of care from those she identified as needing her help. She took chicken broth to friends who were “poorly”; she supported a lone woman and her disabled son –“deaf and dumb Joey”- who lived two doors away from us; she acted as a Mum for American servicemen who needed reassurance and warmth; and everyone and every religion was welcome in her large house.
Participant 8

Participant 8 is a few months shy of a hundred years old. She is slight and very neatly presented; and apart from thick glasses there is no sense of her being this great age. Her hair is thick and white; her features are calm and her gaze gently searching. She originally comes from a large family and her own family is an extended one which incorporates her own children and grandchildren together with those of her nieces and nephews. She has been a widow for many years.

Participant 8 tells her story softly but there is no strain in her voice. She starts out her story with the observation that she does not think she can be of much help with spiritual stories: however as her story telling moves along it becomes clear her life has been caught up in a powerful clash between religion and spirituality. At times there is anger and outrage evident in her tone of voice as she recalls painful moments: but mostly she seems to be telling her stories from an almost serene viewpoint. She has overcome (or outlived) blind prejudice and spent a life affirming the values of a loving family.
Participant 8: spiritual narratives

I was one of ten children brought up in Wollongong by wonderful parents. All of us children were close; and my parents’ only goal in life was to see us healthy and happy. And this closeness has been handed down into our children’s generation – they are all close and fond of each other.

This family closeness started with my parents. I think each of my parents had had a difficult childhood and when they found each other they determined to make their children feel loved and wanted. Even when Mum and Dad died I always felt they were around: and all my brothers and sisters had similar experiences.

Before Mum died she stayed with me for a while. She had a favourite spot in front of a window where she liked to catch the morning sun. After she died I would hear her in the bedroom; or I would look down the hallway and think “I’m going to find you there in front of the window”. I felt sure she was near me.

I had similar experiences with my own husband. After he died I heard him asking as clear as anything “Dear, are you there?” – just as I was waking up. I also saw a figure of him one night by the TV. Again it was very clear. My husband used wear headphones so that the sound of the TV did not disturb me. His figure was standing by the TV in the lounge room fixing the gadget which made this noise control work. He was dressed in his nice shirt and pants of which he was very fond. It was a very clear image of him. I told my sons and a niece about this experience.

Another strange experience occurred to me when my sister died unexpectedly. She had been due to be on roster at the CWA tea rooms but had failed to show. Phone calls were made and eventually my husband and I drove over to see what had happened. The next door neighbour was there but none of us could get in as her house was securely locked and the only possible window entrance was too high for us to reach. The arrival of the ambulance soon meant they were able to access the house through the window; and we found my sister lifeless on the floor. I was distressed beyond the telling at the loss of my sister. Yet soon after she was found I felt a hand stroking my arm as if to comfort me. I felt it was my sister and I felt comforted.
My father was in fact very psychic; and there are a number of examples of this. Dad had been asleep when he awoke to see the figure of a man at the dressing table; the man spoke to him and then just disappeared. My father rang his cousin and told him. The next morning a baby was born to the cousin and it passed away. The “man” had been a forewarning. My father was asked if he was scared by this: but he said “no” – he accepted it.

A more terrible example of this psychic ability of Dad is found in the story of my brother and his motor bike. My brother rode a motor bike; and on one occasion my father had a dream that something had happened to my brother. My father paced about and kept checking out the front of the house for any sighting of my brother or any news. My father “knew” something had happened to Syd. Eventually a chap came to the house and told us about my brother’s dreadful motor bike accident.

My sister also had a level of psychic ability; she knew I was pregnant before I did and that I would have a son. She had similar experiences with her own family – dreaming about children yet to be born and predicting (correctly) whether they would be a girl or a boy. My mother too had some psychic capacity – again as it concerned us children. For example, my sister went to her room one evening early. On retiring to her bedroom, my mother looked up and saw the figure of a girl move past the bed – a girl in a long white robe with long dark curly hair. She knew it was a warning that my sister was unwell – which was indeed to be proven the case.

These are spiritual things I guess; but even though I was raised in the Catholic Church I gave away religion as such years ago. There were a number of things which happened that brought this about.

The worst thing was how our Church dealt with the death of my young brother. It was a dreadful thing: an accidental death as a result of kids just playing around. This sudden tragedy meant that for instance that my marriage was postponed because we had set our wedding day to be that of his birthday. More critically it nearly killed my mother with grief – she lost about 4 stone in weight. In the middle of this the priest came down and said to Mum, “This is God’s way of punishing you for not going to Mass”. My mother became so distraught that the doctor had to be called. We were all furious and my sister told the priest to get out of the house and never come back. I’ve never had much time for the Church since then.
There were other things too: mainly related to my marrying outside the Church. So-called friends sent messages to me saying you won’t be legally married and your children will be illegitimate. (Even later on in life when a so-called friend discovered that you had married out of the Church you found yourself snubbed and never spoken to again.) Nevertheless, my mother really did have the last word here. Just before I was married and because of all the rubbish I was getting I asked Mum whether I really was doing the right thing. She told me “You’re marrying the person you love – you’re not marrying the Church.” So that was that.

One of my most vivid and lasting impressions of the Church comes from when I was a seven year old attending a talk for the Catholic Missions given by a priest. There he was all red and round faced, pointing his finger at us, telling us that “if you lie, you will burn in the pits of Hell – and you will be grilled over a fire just like a sausage.” I was terrified and couldn’t sleep because of this horrible vision. It took Mum weeks to calm me down.

Later when my husband and I moved to West Wollongong we came across an Anglican priest who was helpful and who offered any assistance he could. He seemed to have had some experience with mixed marriages. So I think that the Church does not bring you closer to God – no, rather God is always around.

I do believe in a Supreme Being and I do talk to God. I wonder about how all forms of life – whether it is an ant or us – fit into creation. But thinking about how complex it is really overcomes me. I also wonder about what happens when we die. I have a friend who is a Methodist. She says we mustn’t fret about it. Her view of what happens is this: when a person dies they have to visit all the planets and heavenly bodies on their way to heaven. It is a long journey. I can’t say I agree with this vision of what happens when we die – I think it’s a quicker trip to heaven; but if her vision works for her then that’s fine.
Participant 9

Participant 9 is a slender woman with small delicate features who is (probably) in her eighties. Although her hands and voice shake she invariably conveys a sense of liveliness and daintiness. Her room is very prettily decorated and has the feel of a well-used sitting room. (She feels – she says – like she is coming home every time she comes into it.) Her family looms large in her life from the tragic circumstances of her birth and childhood to the adult children and grandchildren about whom she cares greatly.

Participant 9 tells her story in a voice which is strained and somewhat forced due to health issues. She keeps the listener in a steady somewhat mischievous gaze as she progresses her story. Particularly juicy details are paused over and she checks to see if the desired narrative effect has been achieved. Her story telling –while dramatic – is told very openly and without attempting to gloss over difficult matters. There is also a great deal of humour in her story telling; and she is always ready to support her story with photos and documents she has about her.
Participant 9: spiritual narratives

It is difficult to understand my spiritual story without understanding the tragic circumstances of my birth and early life. My mother was a young Englishwoman and a Catholic. She married into an important rural family; and she had to be married in the Presbyterian Church. Her own Catholic practices such as saying the Rosary had to be done away from sight of the family. With her husband she had three children before he was killed in a riding accident. As a young widow and after some time had passed she entered into an affair with the property’s gardener. I am the child of that union.

Tragically my mother died three days after I was born. As she was dying she asked her best friend – the young 21 year old nurse who was assisting with the birth – to take the baby and care for it as her own. For my eternal gratitude the young woman responded to my mother’s plea; and I then became her child. I could not have wished for a more loving or strong mother. The family of my mother’s dead husband arrived at my mother’s home and took the two girls and a boy (my half-sisters and half-brother) – as well as anything else they could get their hands on – away. They could not claim me as my (now) mother carried me beyond their reach.

My mother (as I now will call her) also came from early settlers in the area. Her relatives had taken up land in the 1880’s – around the time settlers were being harried by the “Yahooo”. This was a creature which crashed through the bush making mad laughing noises – hence the name “Yahooo”. It was thought it may have been a baboon which had escaped from a ship or circus and had gone wild. In any case Grandmother’s relatives who did shepherding had built their log cabin with a stake palisade around it to protect themselves from this creature and other dangers such as local aboriginal peoples.

The bush in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century was a dangerous place. There were many stories told by my grandmother about this. The way the early settlers treated the aborigines for example was terrible – but the relationship could be deadly for all parties concerned. Grandmother told the story of how grandfather used to pay some young aboriginal men to split kindling wood for them. He would pay them with a plug of tobacco for their labour. One day as a joke he said to the pair of young aboriginal men who had just finished chopping the kindling, “No baccy today,” as he walked back into his hut to collect the tobacco plug for them. It was his idea of a joke, but the young men did not take it as one.
The next thing grandfather heard was the young man’s tomahawk flying through the air towards him. Quickly he ducked his head and the tomahawk sliced into the side of his hut: he kept on walking collected his gun from inside; and turned and shot the aboriginal man dead. Grandfather then gave the plug of tobacco to the remaining aboriginal man to bury his brother. Nothing was ever reported or done about this.

Women also had to be very careful in their isolated homes in the bush. Another of grandmother’s stories concerned a young woman who was raped and badly beaten by a swaggie as she had been baking the family’s damper. Her husband on coming home found his wife in a dreadful condition. After doing what he could to help her, he got back on his horse and tracked the swaggie to where he was camping. He surprised and shot the swaggie there in his camp with the stolen damper still in his mouth. Again nothing resulted from his actions: it was seen as justice having been done.

These are the sort of bush stories my grandmother would tell me. She could shoot a gun as well as any man; and was resourceful and quick witted. When my mother as a three year old had overturned a pot of boiling hot oats over her, my grandmother ran and placed her in a tub of cold water up to her neck. She kept her there for a long time; and my mother was left with no scars from this episode.

My grandmother also was a strict woman; and had a clear idea of what was moral and what was not. She was Methodist by denomination but in an era of bush log huts there was little organised religion around. Instead my grandmother would read her Bible every night; and try to lead a Christian life. When she had to go and watch the sheep, she would take a storybook with her to read to the children who of course had to accompany her for safety. All her children learned to read and write.

Her daughter (my mother) was an exceptional and compassionate woman. As an example of this let me tell how she helped an old swaggie. He had camped away from our property but when she hadn’t seen for some time she went looking for him. She found the swaggie seriously ill and befouled. She put him in a wheelbarrow, wheeled him home, cleaned him up and nursed him back to health. She wouldn’t see anyone suffer if she could help. I loved her dearly.
My mother eventually married a good and kind man. Our religious affiliations were haphazard. My mother married in the Presbyterian Church; she had me christened in the Anglican Church; and I had cousins who were Catholic, Salvation Army and Methodist. We all got on and religion was never an issue. My mother would however listen to me say my prayers of an evening and make sure I prayed for everyone I needed to. The reason initially I wanted to become Catholic was due to having Catholic cousins with whom I was very close. However once I got to the Catholic services I loved it. I loved the vestments and I loved the ritual. I said to Mum, “I want to become a Catholic,” and she replied, “That’s ok – that’s fine.” I went to instructions, got baptized, took Holy Communion and attended Mass. My mother gave me my birth mother’s rosary beads which were one of the few things she managed to salvage for me from my mother’s possessions. I have them still and they are very precious.

However I must say that up until coming into the Nursing Home I remained a habit Catholic.

My life until very recently had been too busy with keeping a home, rearing children and caring for my husband when in later years he suffered from Alzheimer’s disease.

My life is now given over to prayer – I say thankyou God for every day. I have put together a collection of prayers which I use for different things in my life. I have prayers to the Holy Mother – these are especially important to me; I have prayers for loved ones and I give my dear grandchildren for example specifically into the care of a departed loved one; I have prayers before going into surgery; and I have prayers for the one who is left after a dear one dies. Prayers become very important to you when you come into a Nursing Home. You can now live your life as a prayer; and take up the opportunity for growing your personal spirituality.

I used to have my statuette of Mary on my dressing table at home. To be truthful in the past I didn’t pay attention to it – I would lift it now and then and dust under it. Now however because of prayer she means much more to me.

One last thing: I did once have a very strange spiritual experience. After my husband died I moved into a self-contained unit. There one evening I saw my husband standing in the bedroom in his favourite striped pyjamas. He was reaching his hand out to me as if he wanted me to go with him: and I’m certain I heard him say to me, “All you have to do is hold my hand and I’ll show you the road home”. I tried and tried to reach him because I so
wanted to go with him. But I couldn’t reach him. He faded and left the room. I was so shaken by this vision and so distressed I couldn’t go with him because he had been such a wonderful husband. When I told the care staff and others about what had happened they told me not to be concerned. “It just wasn’t your time to go with D.” I suppose that’s right.
Participant 10

Participant 10 is in her late eighties. Although of an age that is at the older end of the aged demographic she appears strong and capable. For example, with the aid of a walking stick she can move directly and quickly towards you. She separated from her husband many years ago; and had the rearing of her five children – one daughter and four boys. About her room she has an old sepia photograph in a place of prominence which shows her family when she was a child – mother, father, herself, another sister and seven brothers. She has an active mind – reading, playing cards and completing jigsaw puzzles.

Participant 10 tells her story in a voice which admittedly is cracked with age but which is nonetheless strong and definite. There is no sense of pretence when she talks about the past – if someone drank too much she simply places it on record. If there is any anxiety is her story telling, it is to reassure the listener about the truth of what she has just told. She is a treasure trove of personal stories from the late 19th to early 20th century period of our past.
In my family there was Mother and Father, seven brothers, an elder sister and myself – eleven of us in all. We were a happy family and I could not have wished for better. Mother and Father were strict and my father would say “Don’t fight here in the house – you don’t hear your mother and me fighting so you shouldn’t either. If you’re going to fight, you can head on up to the paddock at the back of the house!”

We were nominally Presbyterians: but we weren’t a strict family in terms of religion. There was no resting on a Sunday for example because there were cows to milk and a living to be earned. The bush and country life as I experienced it as a child was free of religious bigotry. Everyone was just getting on with their lives as best they could and helping out whenever they were able to.

In fact I would say that our lives were rather rich in experience and certainly stories. My grandmother had come out to Australia to work as a cook and nanny for a wealthy Jewish family: this family moved to Gympie which is where she met my grandfather. He had come from Scotland looking for a new start in a new country. At various times the family worked a dairy farm, ran cattle and had a pub. We pretty well knew everyone. My grandfather in particular had a lot of funny stories to tell.

He for example would tell us about the Irish miners who worked around Gympie. Every couple of weeks or so the miners would leave the bush and travel into Gympie to get provisions; and they would stop at Grandpa’s pub for drinks on the way back. On one occasion Biddy O’Sullivan had had far too many drinks at the pub and couldn’t walk. So they hoisted her onto the back of the cart where she promptly wet all over the bags of sugar. Her companions rightly complained about this but Biddy simply said, “Stop your fussing, it will soon all dry out and be as good as gold!” This actually seemed to satisfy the rest of them and they just rolled into the horse and cart and continued on their way back to the bush. So everyone just fitted in and managed. The miners had a Saturday Night Dance at the pub; and my grandmother played the piano for the dancing. These Saturday night dances would often end up in a fight because some of the locals would insist on stirring up the Irish with the song “…didn’t we give the Irish hell at the Battle of Boyne Water…”. When this happened my grandfather would clear the hotel and that was the end of the night’s entertainment. Really, we were all trying to make a life for ourselves.
My grandfather was the loveliest man. He would say to me “Come here Lassie and I’ll give you a big Scottish hug”. My mother loved and respected him and when he came to our farm she would always call him “Father” and make him bread and butter with capsicum. He thought he was made. I will remember him as always being very well dressed and driving a pony and trap. (He had bought himself a car but managed to have it run him over as he cranked the motor to start the car. At which point he arrived at our place telling my parents to give the blessed thing to the boys as he was not going to give up the pony and trap!)

But the bush had its dark side as well. You had to be tough and not complain. My mother as a young girl would sometimes go out on her pony and bring in the cattle. Once she climbed a tree to gain a vantage point to see any strays. She fell and broke her leg. She somehow managed to get back on the pony, ride home, and allowed the break to heal itself without telling her mother. (As an old lady, when doctors examined her in hospital for something entirely different, the broken bone story came out.) And it wasn’t only accidents which made the bush dangerous. People could also be dangerous – especially men when they were drunk. My mother told us of one occasion when she had ridden into town to get mail and groceries she over Stayed her time. This meant she would be riding home in the dusk. One chap – a neighbour’s son - who had had too much to drink tried to sexually assault her. She rode her pony away from him as fast as possible but he pursued her. She took her small pony into thick scrub where she knew it would be difficult for him to follow, put her hand over her pony’s nose so it wouldn’t give her position away and waited for him to give up searching for her. In time he did give up and she rode home unharmed. She never told her parents as they would have been angry with her for coming home in the dark, and she knew any story she told would be denied by the man involved. As children this man would come to the house to buy surplus horses and we were always puzzled as to why we were sent indoors and why he was never offered hospitality.

I said we weren’t big on organised religion; but our family consciously lived a Christian life. We were always aware of acting in a Christian way. Let me give you some examples.

My paternal grandmother was regarded by many in our area as a “very fine woman” for the help she gave to others. This was in addition to nursing a son back to health after he returned half mad from the First World War. (He had been in the trenches when he and a mate were shelled. The mate was blown to bits beside him and he was drenched in his mate’s blood and covered in his body bits. It sent him mad; and to begin with on his return,
my grandmother had to tie her son to his bed to stop him wandering off half crazed into the night.) Her reputation as the local midwife not only extended to the white women of the area, she would also help the local aboriginal women when they were giving birth. She would also try and help them bring their children along in their health. She did however suspect that (horrifically) cannibalism was being practiced in that on a few occasions she heard a baby screaming in the night and when she went down the next morning to help none of the aboriginal women would meet her eyes and no one would respond to questions about a baby or screaming.

My parents also consciously lived a Christian life. My father let a Seventh Day Adventist family that was down on its luck stay in a disused cottage on our property. Moreover he provided a horse and wagon for them to get underway earning a living. Aboriginal people also had a rough camp near our house. (They were known for placing an emu claw under their foot when they were trying to escape being tracked.) My father would help them with food and basic health care – but he learned that it was best done as an exchange for some work.

When times were really bad in the depression my father let swaggies camp along the creek that ran at the back of the property: He also let them take vegetables from our vegetable plots on the land. I can remember how the local policeman Dinny Barlow came riding up to our place on his fine white horse. Dinny told my father, “You shouldn’t encourage those swaggies to come onto your place. You’ll all be murdered in your beds.” My father replied, “These are people down on their luck: how can I tell them ‘No’?” He let the swaggies help with the fences. But he always cautioned us children about keeping away from the swaggies and the elder boys were always on the lookout for any problems.

And that’s how I too have tried to live my life. I’ve helped out where I can; and just kept on making the best of my situation. I loved my family and I still love having their photos about me. They still leave me with the gift of happy memories.

But I also have some unorthodox spiritual tales to tell. Perhaps this spiritual side of the family comes from my maternal grandmother – you could never really tell a lie to her, she always knew what was right. The same thing with Mum; and to some extent with me – “There’s a little bit of a witch about you”, she would say to me. It was always hard to pull the
wool over my eyes. (My mother however was dead against spiritualism. She thought it was very wrong trying to contact spirits.)

The most dramatic spiritual experience that happened in our family occurred to my sister’s son. My sister’s husband was a drunk. Time after time the publican would call for the sons to come and collect him and take him home. In the end he knew his life was such a mess that he got totally drunk and sat in his car with the fumes feeding into it and killed himself. Sometime later the second son – the son who had had the most to do with his father – was on the property fixing fences with a number of other men. Suddenly a herd of cattle appeared racing down the hill towards them as if they were being chased. As the startled men looked at the approaching cattle they could see that indeed the cattle were being chased by a black thing or shape of some sort. The fellows there became very frightened; and my nephew was terrified – because as it came closer he could see it was the spirit of his dead father. He didn’t know what to do. So he held out his hand to the black smoky spirit and said “Hello Dad.” The spirit reached out and touched his hand: and disappeared.

All the men saw it. My nephew was an honest man and well respected in the community. But he talked about that experience for years.

My younger brother was also psychic and would see things happening before they actually did. He wouldn’t tell anyone about this ability because he believed everyone would think he was mad. I only knew about it because he trusted me; and we were very close.

And my final spiritual experience actually involves this younger brother, Jim. After I parted from my husband I worked hard to keep my family going. (Jim at this stage had died recently.) One evening I was unusually tired: and as I’m falling off to sleep I kept having something brush my hair. I thought at first it was a moth; and I kept shooing it away. But the brushing kept happening. I looked up over the covers and I could see faintly by my wardrobe, Jim. “Oh, it’s you, Jim,” I said “go away I’m tired.” The spirit disappeared and never returned. I do regret telling him to go away; and I wished afterwards I had spoken to him.
Participant 11

Participant 11 is in her early nineties. A fall a couple of years ago left her effectively with a useless right arm. This resulted in her moving into a residential facility where she is appreciative of the care provided. In the last few weeks she fell again and cracked some ribs. This has left her in great pain and limited her mobility and socialization. While she has never married she has many nieces and nephews who stay in touch with her on a regular basis. A photo of her extended family stands prominently on a table in her room which otherwise is quite sparse. In the past she had a brush with cancer; and is clearly concerned as next generation members of her family also battle with the condition. She doesn’t like fuss – and seems to appreciate economies of words and decoration.

Participant 11 actually struggles to tell her story through the discomfort of the pain occasioned by the cracked ribs. The story emerges more through conversation than through descriptive flow. Nevertheless P16 is straight forward in her language and description of events and experiences. She commits to the story telling but avoids any embellishment of details.
Participant 11: spiritual narratives

I was the youngest of a large family – mother, father and nine surviving children. (Two children were lost at quite a young age.) The family was everything to us as a result of our parents being so family-oriented. We were a bush family out Roma way: although later I was to attend boarding school in Toowoomba.

Religion was a big part of our family. Because we were in the bush we only were able to go to Mass once a month. There was just a priest to see to us: no nuns played a role in this early part of my religious life. Nevertheless our family would say the Rosary every evening; and we would try to picture those moments to which the Rosary was leading us in each decade.

In our bush community there were no barriers caused by religion. Everyone’s support was built around the social group. My parents taught us about everyday life issues through calling upon their own life experiences. They taught us the importance of trying to live a good life: the value of compassion and how we needed to treat other people the way we would like to be treated. This meant that we all shared in the everyday things of our community – for example we would all attend the funeral of a member of the community without regard to faith tradition.

World War II now impacted my life. My brothers were taken off to fight and my oldest sister found herself responsible for running the farm. I moved down to Brisbane. For 10 years approximately I worked in live-in situations. And it is at this time I became involved in charity work. My most extensive commitment during this time was the work I undertook on behalf of the Little King’s Movement for the Handicapped. This is a Catholic movement which aims to support children with physical and mental disabilities. I feel a lot of good work was done here opening up experiences to children who otherwise would have been left in chairs and rooms without much stimulus. I also don’t know how we would have gone in today’s environment of insurance costs and other regulations. I had had no set plan to work in this charity – I had had no special call. Rather I heard from someone that this group needed someone and I drifted into it trying to help.

I am glad I have come to this Home – I feel cared for: and I have made friends. I have also kept my spiritual life through Mass and through prayer. My spiritual life is fine.
Participant 12

Participant 12 is in his seventies. He has a commanding but welcoming presence; and introduces you warmly into his home. Married with children and grandchildren his life has been one full of achievement in terms of academic study and professional standing. Having qualified as a lawyer he rapidly advanced to an appointment as a magistrate: and after retiring from this role he and his wife spent time undertaking small scale farming, teaching in China and perhaps most critically undertaking studies in theology.

Participant 12 tells his story in a surprising mix of measured narrative and emotional interjections. (For example, he will interrupt the flow of his story to enthusiastically produce a meaningful image or treasured photograph.) His narrative is a determined effort to maintain a sense of a rational decision making while acknowledging the strong emotions which have also driven the course of his (and his partner’s) life. He interrogates his own narrative as well as often returning any questions posed by the listener with another question. At all times he is challengingly frank without being intimidating in any way. His personal search to satisfy those questions which he himself has posed is almost painful in its focus.
Participant 12: spiritual narratives

My spiritual journey was largely one through orthodox Catholicism, but now outside it.

This journey reached a crisis point around the time of my studying for first a degree and then a Master’s degree in theology. At some late point in the study I realised that my religious life wasn’t enough: there had to be more to life than what my orthodox Catholic experience was providing. This realisation led to problems with the Eucharist – particularly associated with poor liturgical practices at Mass. I started actually listening to the Eucharist prayers and I thought, “I don’t believe that.” And then I thought about the Creed and I thought, “I don’t understand or agree with that.”

It was the study really. I got the “God thing” out of Philosophy rather than Theology. Of key importance was later Christian philosophy – particularly the work of Alfred North Whitehead and his concept of process relational thought. Whitehead provides one of the best arguments for God’s actions in the world – how God and our experience of reality intersect. All things and experiences come to a point in time; and at that point there is the “Aha” moment. Then we move on. This is the process by which we grow – our “Aha” moment would be the Divine Lure which attracts the situation to the good.

But perhaps I should give you my story from the beginning.

I was educated by the Christian Brothers in the Victorian Catholic Education system. The experience ranged from largely uninspiring teaching to a brutal three year stretch with an individual who had perfected the bash and crash style of teaching. I finished at Year 11 and after two years working as a clerk in the railways was taken into National Service: and that was my first contact outside of Catholicism with others. Now I had to deal with what for me were new concepts – concepts of ethics and loyalty. I knew all about mortal sin – but these were new ideas.

I then joined the CMF, a required part of national Service where my OIC was a lawyer. We got around to talking about future study and career options: he asked, “Have you ever thought about doing law?” At about the same time I became close to Marg (my future wife) who was studying Applied Science. So I took up a position in the Courts Section of the Public Service; and commenced studying for certain Law Subjects. For the first time in my life I
enjoyed study: after I gained the basic Magistrate’s qualification (I just had to get old enough) I decided to continue studying and finished the full Law Degree. After a time however I entered private practice in Victoria where the offer of a partnership eventuated. I had already decided that I didn’t want to be tied down to the partnership of a legal firm in the city and went to the country.

Marg and I agreed that I could apply for an advertised job as a Magistrate in the Northern Territory. By a curious set of events – including the impact of Cyclone Tracy – after being appointed to Alice Springs, some two years later I ended up as the Chief Magistrate for the Northern Territory. I held this position for a period of 10 years. Then I fell prey to a serious bout of reactive depression: occasioned by the physical and emotional exhaustion associated with my professional role, by my family background, and by my Church beliefs. To put it bluntly I was scared stiff of God, but probably thought that I had put such ideas behind me.

The outcome of this episode was the end of my career as a Magistrate. I was superannuated: but with medications I was able to control and come out of the depression. Being relatively young at the time I still wanted to “do something”. So Marg and I tried our hand at running a small orchard at Elimbah after studying horticulture at Gatton. I also sought to engage with my Church in a more personally positive way.

At this stage I had undertaken two 8 day retreats at St Lucia. Previously Marg had done a retreat in the home and I went to the final Eucharist, and Holy Pictures were being handed out. To be frank, I hate “holy pictures” – they are an unreality as far as I am concerned. But this one I still have and I will show it to you. As you can see I have had it enlarged to fit a picture frame. It is a seascape at dawn or sunset with a verse from Ps: 46:10 written below – “Be still, and know that I am God.” So I actually then used this as a meditation assistance on my second retreat but it wasn’t working for me. I wasn’t sure about why it was not working; and I was on the point of pulling out of the retreat, as I was aware of the stress.

Then while I was munching my cornflakes I heard an inner voice say, “If you want someone to climb a mountain, I’m your man. I will be cut and bruised and may break a leg but I will be there. Why not having got halfway up your mountain think the view is a fine one from here – and it’s been a good physical work out? Then after a short pause the thought came God loves me where I am.”
These were powerful words. Of course they were. But now they were powerful because there was belief behind the statement. This “aha” experience would lead me to overcome my deep unconscious fear of God.

However, on first returning home from the retreat I spent 2 or 3 days walking around like a zombie – largely due to the medications I was still taking. I went to a psychiatrist – and while I didn’t tell him the story of my “aha” experience – I went seeking help to fully overcome my depression. Gradually the medication dosages were reduced and in the end I came off the medications completely.

I next entered into what I think of as my period of community work – which was a wonderful “whole -of –life” thing. I started out doing a course in Psychiatric Pastoral Care run through St Pat’s. I then undertook ecumenical hospital chaplaincy work at Prince Charles Hospital. Visiting believers and non-believers was a growth experience.

In parallel with this period of community engagement I also sought to develop spiritually. As a joint spiritual journey with my wife we went to Reflection Days – Marg was always more involved with prayer. And now I enjoyed it but it was different to how I had experienced prayer before. The sister running the Reflection Days suggested that we may like to consider doing study at Banyo in order to help with our prayer. This we did: and it created for me a taste for academic study with its intellectual stimulation. I didn’t stop until I had got my degree.

But then these parallel streams of community engagement and spiritual development came together. When I had finished the Graduate Degree in Theology we both experienced a life changing conversation when we had decided to apply for positions as Adult Lay Missionaries. We didn’t know what we wanted to do, but a requisite was to provide religious referees. We approached the sister who had suggested we study at Banyo, who said she would and then asked us, “What are you going to do? Have you ever thought about teaching in China?” We had never ever dreamed of that but it really didn’t take long for us to say, “Yes, we would go.” We had 18 months in Chongqin at a language university: and we enjoyed life in China! For us both this was a truly broadening experience. It was an experience as we realised the reality that God works everywhere in the world.
(After 18 months we returned home for a year. Then we returned to China for another 6 months – teaching in Nanjing. We still keep in touch with some of our students and we are very close to one couple who has settled in Australia.)

On finally returning home to Australia I went back to Theology College to complete my Master’s degree. That was ten years ago. I then started to have those problems with the Catholic orthodoxy which I mentioned at the outset of my story. On attending Mass I started to get the feeling of not being involved: I started asking myself, “What do I need to be here for?”

My search (and Marg’s) led us to St Mary’s in the Trades Hall at South Brisbane. Initially we went for the meditation sessions conducted by St Mary’s; and then we realised that in a worship and prayer sense this is what we wanted. As encouraged by Father Kennedy, the service at St Mary’s in the Trades Hall is one of full group participation. After the readings and homily, the Eucharist involves the group standing around the table with the Eucharist being led by two people, one of whom is always a woman: it is way outside current Catholic theological understanding, but very prayerful.

This approach to the Mass is also reflected in the emphasis on meditation and prayer. The spiritual content of your prayer is approached through meditation practices such as use of mantras, blanking the mind, and stillness. It belongs of course to our own long mystical tradition: but it is realising a personal spirituality as distinct from following a remote institutional belief.

So this is where Marg and I are comfortable at the moment. I am always searching for ways and places to grow as a spiritual individual. I feel free to still search within my Catholic tradition - for example, I sometimes attend sessions conducted by the Jesuits. We both still read a lot of spiritual reading. I would not be frank if I did not acknowledge the shock and in the early days a touch of guilt of moving away from the standard Catholicism of my upbringing and almost all of my adult life. But one’s spirituality is an evolving creation – it requires moving out of your comfort zone and actively searching.
Participant 13

Participant 13 is in her nineties. She and her husband are now living in an aged care facility. Her husband is a resident with dementia but because Participant 13 helps care for him in their joint living arrangement they are both able to stay together. While her posture is bent and it would seem she may have difficulty moving about, Participant 13 is active around their rooms - gently maintaining both dignity and a deal of independence for both her and her husband. She is also able to walk around a large local shopping mall with her daughter once a week. They have one child – her daughter of whom Participant 13 is very proud.

Participant 13 tells her story in a slow hesitant manner. Her voice is soft if somewhat throaty. She is not comfortable with telling a story on her own: rather she prefers to have the to-and-fro of a conversation to allow her story to emerge. Full of doubts as to whether her story is worth any interest at all she progresses in a hesitant tone – checking to see if her information is of interest. She is largely unaware that she stands as a last fading line to an important part of our Australian history – the late nineteenth century Utopian bush communes.
Participant 13: spiritual narratives

As part of a land grant made available to my father, our family became part of what is known as the Gayndah Commune. By the time my siblings and I came along the farm was owned outright by the family but all the Catholic Farmers in the district held together and co-operated – to survive.

We were a bush family: we were removed from almost all contact with other people – except on Sundays when we went to the old bush Church to attend Mass by the local area priest and to attend Sunday-School taught by the nuns or occasionally by Mother Anthony who knew all the farmers and individual Catholics in the Burnett. These Sunday Church gatherings were where the Catholic farmers and other men met to talk about their crops and to share information. The women of the farms could also stay in contact with each other on a day to day basis through a system of signals using sheets placed on clothes lines – these could clearly be seen over significant distances. This could be critical – especially in case of accidents or other emergencies.

Our family consisted of my parents, my four brothers and my three sisters – two older, one younger than me. We were all close. Our parents were strict having themselves been brought up in rather harsh circumstances. Life as you could imagine was very hard: and when something hit us like having to have the farm quarantined due to an outbreak of diphtheria it all became that much more difficult. Nevertheless, every mealtime all of us would kneel round the table and say the Rosary. Both parents would share stories about their own experiences growing up; and try to show us the right way to live.

When I was eight I left the farm for two weeks to board with the nuns at Gayndah in order to prepare for my first communion. I was a bush kid and I was amazed at all I saw on this visit: totally new things like a flight of steps, well-off exotic Lebanese Catholics who provided food for the priests, and buildings which were grand and properly built. I will never forget my First Communion – especially Father Gleeson with the remains of bacon and eggs from the celebratory breakfast on his lips! My elder sister was smart and Mother Anthony got her sent to the Convent at Nambour: but it didn’t suit her. Nevertheless we four girls kept our religion and stayed close.
Life on the farm became too unprofitable to sustain us all: and so it was decided that my grandmother would move with some of us to Brisbane. My older brothers had left the farm seeking work with relatives or on droving trips. They weren’t well treated; and one brother lost an eye when a slither of metal entered it whilst working in Mackay. (The metal slither started to move and the pain was so excruciating that he begged the doctor to remove the eye. That’s how he lost it.)

We moved to Brisbane and soon found our local Church – it was a steep walk up the hill to Mass! My grandmother looked after us grandchildren and even after other children coming to Brisbane from the surrounding farms at Byrnestown. At core this was an extended farm family with its roots reaching back to those Catholic farmers of what had once been the Gayndah Commune.

So from this tough beginning to my life I have always stuck to my religion.

Our house was blessed by Father in the name of our Lord of the Sacred Heart. The image of our Lord which was blessed by the priest on that occasion was so special. When the priest died we took this image blessed by him to his Remembrance Ceremony at the Church. In our own room here in the facility I have a room blessing which was given to us by my niece. It shows Our Lady of the Rosary and Our Lord of the Sacred Heart.

I always pray in bed before going to sleep – mostly to Our Lord of the Sacred Heart. And at important times in my life my prayers were answered. My husband has over the years been very ill – requiring surgery on a number of occasions. I have prayed for him (and for myself) – and we’ve got through things so far at least.

When my daughter was born she was a premature baby weighing only 2 pound 13 ounces. She should not have survived but I prayed for her to pull through – and she did. The nurses at the hospital said she was a real fighter! This was so important for me and my husband as I was unable to have any more children.

My daughter too has faith. She observes Mass and joins in with her Church community. But she really stands up for herself and is not backward in speaking her mind. She has told the priest that his services are too long for older people to cope with. (He has in fact listened to her; and did shorten his services.)
Oh as a final thought - I know someone from the university wrote a book about us and the Gayndah Commune. There’s a picture of me inside it – standing with others in front of the old bush school. Typically my head is lowered so that you can’t see my face.
Participant 14

Participant 14 is ninety two years old; and apart from impaired mobility appears bright and involved with everything around her. She comments, “Everyone says, ‘How young looking you are!’” She is pleased with the correctness of these observations. She was widowed many years ago: and she has three children and five grandchildren.

Participant 14 tells her story in a strong voice with particular points of view reinforced with a dramatic exclamation and a forceful nod of the full thick head of white hair. There is a definite-ness to her spiritual story which is framed within her deep Catholic faith. As she talks many residents of the large aged care facility in which she now lives pass by and exchange “hellos” and quick snippets of chat. Hands are patted and every individual is warmly greeted. The exchanges are genuine and spontaneous. She is a gregarious person who appears interested in people above all else.
Participant 14: spiritual narratives

In my life I have had so much illness and sickness that the fact that I am here tells me by itself that God has been good to me. There are many instances throughout my life where I know my life was saved by prayer and God.

Take my first pregnancy for example: I was in my late twenties and 6 months into the pregnancy when I fell over in the back yard going to talk to my husband. On the Sunday night I became very ill. The doctor came to the house and I was sent to hospital where it was discovered I had serious appendicitis. The appendix had wound itself around my tubes, and if these ruptured both I and the baby would have died. They operated and saved me but I lost the baby. I was dangerously ill but I prayed and prayed and it was a miracle that I lived.

So prayer has always been a big thing for me. I say the rosary every night and I talk to Mary McKillop. I have conversations with her and ask her for help with things. I think Mary has done wonderful things for Australia; and I think it was a disgrace that it took so long to make her a saint. I don’t like the Chapel for her at St Stephens – it is too threatening. I like the image of Mary in her nun’s habit caring for us.

I also pray every night to the Miraculous Infant Praying. I’ve been praying to the Miraculous Infant Praying every night since I was about seventeen years old. He originally was a gift from my boss after I had been ill and had had another three months stay in hospital. But the statuette I have of him now in my room was a gift from my daughter who brought him back from Europe for me. After I broke my hip some time ago they told me I wouldn’t be able to walk without a rollator. But I prayed and prayed like mad to my saints and now I can walk without a rollator. Give me my saints: I lean on them in my darkest hours.

Jesus is also important. He is just like us and he suffered just like us for us. (The Christian calendar is mixed up – it’s not in line with Jesus’ life.) In any case the most important thing is Easter – that’s the part of the Jesus story which affects me the most.

Set prayers however can be a bit of a pain. They can make you irritable – you can use your own. Mass can also be a bug bear – with some priests in particular being rather pompous. However I have devoutly observed Church attendance since I was a very young person. I think that people at the Mass are trying to do their best. The liturgy is God’s way of showing
us a better life. Religion is something I have always believed in: it’s in your heart all your life. It doesn’t necessarily come from your parents – it’s just in your life. I always remember my first communion – it was so special. God has been good.

Some of the nuns in my life have also been important – from the strict elderly nun of my schooldays to the nuns who come and conduct services here in the facility. (I must say I liked the nun’s habit better than what they wear today. It commanded more respect.) The nun who does the service here is very spiritual. She makes God real to the people here: so good, so lovely.

I do worry about where we go when we die. The Church is very silent about Hell these days. I think that shows carelessness on the Church’s part. I also think the Church can be seen to be full of hypocrisy when they give drug lords big Catholic funerals. That’s the one thing that gives me the wobbles! Does my love of the Church when I know things like this happen make me sanctimonious?

I do get sad about my family. “Pray for us Nanna” they say. “Pray for it yourselves.” I tell them – they shouldn’t be getting Nanna to do their prayers. God bless them all. They were all educated in the best Catholic schools – but they’re not Catholic the way I am. One family member has married into a Uniting Church family. But this daughter-in-law always rings to see how I am; and I will go with her to UC services if I’m invited. I’m sure she is on her way to heaven. So I guess what is really important is that you are a good person.

This aged care facility I am in now is wonderful. They treat me like a princess: it is a nice place even though I am sometimes lonely for my family. Before coming here I tried very hard to stay in my own home and I had the help of a very kind couple. But when one of the partners broke their hip I had to come to this facility. And yet again everything worked out for the best. In this place people are re-connecting and going to Mass. I think Catholics should be Catholic – but generous to all others. At the moment I am trying to break down the “Floor culture”; and I am happy in trying to help get people back to the Church.
Participant 15

Participant 15 is a small woman in her seventies. She is well educated and very well read. As the younger child by some 8½ years from her older sister, she was effectively “an only child”. Training as a teacher and travelling widely has lent her life a richness which she is quick to acknowledge. She remained unmarried but stayed close to her mother, her sister and her sister’s children. A recent serious brush with cancer and inappropriate medications treatment has left her wrestling with decisions about how to now best direct her life.

Participant 15 tells her story with stops and starts which clearly frustrate her. This struggle to find the right word quickly enough is an outcome of neurological damage caused by an ill-advised medications program aimed at supporting her cancer treatment. In spite of this difficulty P15 tells her story clearly and with considerable analysis and clarifying description. Throughout she stresses the determined nature of her character and how she has overcome obstacles which some observers (including some doctors) believed were impossible for her to achieve. She is a “stubborn little fighter”!
Participant 15: spiritual narratives

I must start out by saying that up until fairly recently I have had a blessed life. I have never wanted for anything. I was a teacher and I loved my work; I travelled widely; and I lived very comfortably in a large well-appointed home.

I had been raised and educated in the Catholic faith; and engagement with my faith has stayed with me throughout life. From a child I have gone to Mass every Sunday and I have said my prayers either by saying the rosary or by directly conversing with God and the saints. (My relationship with God – either as Creator or Jesus – is my most critical one at the present time.)

My spiritual life was (and is) rich. I am a visual person and I rely on this capacity when I worship and reflect on spiritual matters. I use whatever is at hand – an illustrated guide to saying the rosary, maps of the Holy Land, books and images of St Mary McKillop, ‘religious’ cards collected by me or sent to me. I have never wavered in my belief; and while I don’t believe the Church has all the answers I have been more than content to follow a Christian way of life within the Catholic Church. (I also believe and hope that our new Pope Francis will bring about important changes in our practices which will bring the Church more into line with the needs of everyday people.) Also, when I look at Nature I can’t see how people can deny a Creator. Nature is so beautiful. Look at Ayer’s Rock – it’s so stunning and speaks to us spiritually. Look at a new beautiful baby – how can there be no Creator? There has to be a Creator.

So this was (and is) me – as I said at the outset- a person rich in blessings. Then I was diagnosed with cancer – and that was a shock to the system.

Initially all went well with the cancer treatment. I had 12 weeks of chemotherapy: and during this period a teacher friend of mine supported me at every step of the way. Then it was decided to back up the initial 12 weeks with a different chemotherapy treatment. This was a disaster. This treatment brought on paralysis and affected my brain function. I remember clearly lying in my bed in PA Hospital when “Dr Creature” called up the family to my room to tell them in front of me as if I didn’t exist “I give her three months to live.” I thought “You b...... I’ll show you.” That was four years ago.
Certainly at that stage, without my faith I would have jumped off a cliff. My mother used to say to me “You’re a stubborn little beggar.” And without a certain strength of character which lives with my faith I could not have tackled the next part of this cancer experience. You understand I couldn’t care for myself. So I was eventually taken into an excellent but small nursing home on the North Side. I was in a wheelchair and I don’t think anyone really thought I would walk independently again. I was being showered one day when I asked the nurse helping me to hoist me so that I could try walking independently from one end of the bathroom to the other end. She did as I requested and it took me 19 steps to complete the walk. When I finished this crossing I burst into tears. My sobbing was misinterpreted by the nurse who thought I was distressed: she apologised for allowing me to take on the walk. But I responded, “No, you misunderstand. These are tears of joy. I now know I will walk again.” I progressed from the wheelchair to the rollator to a walking stick; and now I am walking independently. It now takes me 4 steps to cross from one side of the bathroom to the other!

You just can’t do something like that without strength from somewhere. I get my strength from my religion.

However I still have issues to confront. When I was unsure as to how I would cope long term I sold up my home and moved into this new (and lovely) care facility. I have left an active, independent life to come to this pleasant but controlled environment. Now I really don’t want to be here but I believe that this is where God wants me to be at this particular time. I don’t understand why – but I do accept it. There is a reason I’m here: there is a reason for everything. Perhaps there is someone here I have to connect with. God will show me.
Participant 16

Participant 16 is in her seventies and has eight children and many grandchildren with whom she engages in an active and highly supportive way. This is especially the case with one baby grandson who has been born with a serious health condition. She worked in the Public Service before raising her family required her full commitment. She enjoys a wide circle of friends from the many groups she works with – as well as keeping in close touch with friends from her early years. Her spiritual stories are not privately held – but neither are they casually shared.

Participant 16 tells her story in a crisp manner – the words are spoken very clearly but are often quickly put into the conversation. Her manner is almost bubbly. She is well read and thoughtful in the points she presents. This thoughtfulness however in no way detracts from the openness evident in her story-telling: and she shares her emotional connection to some events without censoring or closing the listener out in other ways.
Participant 16: spiritual narratives

I suppose like many people my story starts with my family – I was the second youngest in a family of seven. My father worked in the Railways and so we tended to move around a lot – Mackay, Dalby, Chinchilla. We were a happy and close family which experienced hardly any sickness and basically thought of itself as very fortunate.

Our family was also devoutly Catholic. The rosary was said every night; and my parents who were strong on appropriate behaviour linked our faith to a model for good living. I went to a Catholic school from when I was four years old and enjoyed it greatly – in fact my mother used to laugh and say that I cried when I had to stay home over the school holiday breaks. I can’t remember ever playing up about having to go to Church – there was always good company to be had there.

I have said that the family was devoutly Catholic, but I can also say without any hesitation that my parents were never bigoted. We lived in country areas in railway houses, and there was always a spread of faiths in these country communities. Everyone mixed with everyone else with the women in particular being very close. (It is funny when I think of it though – women would address each other as ‘Mrs This’ and ‘Mrs That’ regardless of how close they were. The men on the other hand could call each other by their first names.)

From this start I have remained linked to my Church throughout my life. All my children have had a Catholic education and the majority still go to Mass. We all still hold the conviction that our Christian faith offers a moral foundation for our lives, and promotes a practical “helping others” approach in our communities. (I learn a lot from the many different people in my parish community and how they deal with their needs. For example there is a woman with an alcoholic husband and problem children: yet she presents a hopeful face to the day and is always ready to have a coffee and a chat with you.)

Personally I have never wanted to miss out on Mass: it is part of my life and I need it - and I need prayer. A community of prayer is a very powerful thing. It is particularly powerful when you pray for others. In my Church when there is a particular need people will pray for you. While I’m not a charismatic Catholic we have such a prayer group in our Church community. As you know my baby grandson has a chronic medical condition. One of the members of this prayer group will often come up to me and say “How’s little M? Remember we are praying
for him.” I feel very emotional when I think of this caring act; and I feel their concern and love for him.

Prayer plays out in many different ways in my life.

As well as praying within my own Church community I participate in an ecumenical prayer community. The same applies – here too there is a great sense of community and a shared Christian faith. (One nephew has become a Mormon. He is still family oriented but I have reservations about the Mormon faith. Whenever I am approached I reject their offers – but with politeness.)

I suppose being older I’ve also become more ready to back myself with prayer: and in some ways this has made me a more peaceful person. Some time back I was very angry for a period of time – it had to do with marriage break-ups in my family. So I prayed about this anger I was experiencing and this helped me calm down.

I believe in prayer. If you pray for or about something and nothing happens – well, that’s the answer to your prayer. You’re not meant to have it. And you do have to be careful about what you pray for – although it can at times be almost playful. I have a special place for St Anthony. I am always losing things – especially my keys. So I say to St Anthony “Come on St Anthony, help me remember where I have put those keys.” And I’ve found so many things with his help!

I do pray to God in a larger sense – I pray for the kids and especially for baby M. He’s such a beautiful child to look at; and yet his future is so clouded. I do pray for just a little miracle for him – a blessing for M.

M’s mother is my youngest daughter. She was very independent – a professional modern woman. She already had two beautiful daughters before she had M; but it has been the birth of M with these terrible health challenges which has changed her the most. From being gifted with almost everything, she now has become aware of the other side of life. My daughter is so much more compassionate now; and she is aware of all the children in Ms’ hospital ward not just her own child. Perhaps this gift of compassion given to my daughter is the answer to my prayers. Our dear M has brought a lot of joy to the family: all of my
daughter’s sisters work to help M—he has loads of care and love. I suppose at the end of the
day I think the life you have is the life you were meant to have.

I’ve never actually thought of myself as a “spiritual person” – that’s for holy people such as
priests and nuns. They’re “spiritual people”. I have tried to go to holy hours and retreats but
they are not for me. I like to chat too much; and my life has provided me with a broader view
of a Christian life. I look for goodness in people wherever they are: they don’t have to be
spiritual.

For example, I had a very close girlfriend when we were growing up who took her vows. I put
a lot of effort into keeping in touch with her – but she never once attempted to contact me. I
knew how hard her early days as a novice were and I kept persisting in maintaining the
contact. But she effectively closed down the friendship. On one meeting I said to her “Oh you
are lucky not having to pay bills and wonder where the next meal is coming from.” She
replied with some hostility, “Oh no. You’re the lucky one. You don’t have to spend time with
people you don’t like.” I know she went on to make a career for herself in her order and I did
see her one more time at a Church function. I went to greet her with a kiss; but she
motioned me away saying, “Don’t kiss me, I’ve got a cold.”

This was a friendship that has died. But my many friends in all my parish and community
groups have taught me what real friendship is about – caring for one another.
Participant 17

Participant 17 is a 90 year old woman who entered a religious order over sixty years ago. Her life before retiring was rich in a range of professional and pastoral experiences. She has travelled widely both in Australia and overseas – primarily America and Italy. Part of the reason for this time overseas was to pursue pastoral and theological studies; and to work in administration. Her love of nature – particularly flowers in bloom - comes through strongly in conversation. She sits straight backed yet comfortably poised in her chair.

Participant 17 tells her story in a manner which is both calm and confident. Her words flow easily and there is little struggle to recall names or events. She recounts her spiritual story as a life story; and so the effect is of organic growth rather than a series of episodic events. There is a sense both of precision and transparency in her narrative.
Participant 17: spiritual narratives

I was brought up in a Catholic family – mother, father, five siblings and me. The Church always played a large part in our lives; and so I could say that I always had a spiritual life from the outset. However, clearly this spirituality was framed within a Christian life: we always went for example to Mass and to Benediction on a Sunday afternoon.

I grew up during the war years and had two older brothers in the army. I had wanted to enter the convent during the war but decided to wait until my brothers returned from the war. Up until I made my decision to join an order, my life was that of a normal 20 year old. This decision to join the order was a one which my family completely supported.

My choice of religious order was based on my personal background. I spoke with nuns from a range of orders before I made my final decision. As to why I determined to become a nun hinges on a particular event: I was walking past a house where a poor family lived: it flashed through my mind – a God moment if you like – that perhaps I could help. I felt a nun’s life and work as a sister would provide this opportunity to help.

Through my novitiate years my spirituality developed. Prayer was a critical part of our formation as were the religious practices of a monastic life. However, our formation time also involved preparation for the work we would do – teaching in schools. And so from 23 until my later years I was fully engaged undertaking the work for which I had been prepared: I worked in schools; I worked in religious formation; and I worked in parishes. After my brush with cancer I came to this retirement complex.

Old age provides you with challenges and opportunities with regard your spirituality. As you get older you have to face the reality of letting things go. Some find this hard: but I don’t. Now I have time to reflect and develop my prayer life. This time of “letting go” is actually one of the blessings you get. As I said I continue to pray but the form my prayer takes, has changed. In fact my prayer now involves fewer words – it is better expressed as a quieter, deeper relationship with God. I have been given the grace to let go.

I do have a routine. Early of a morning and at other times during the day I spend time in prayer. I read spiritual books, I read books about the new Pope; I also pray using the
Breviaries. This reading and reflection time is spent largely on my own. I also go out a bit with friends and family.

Again I say that “acceptance” is important. Many people who have reached our age find it harder than I have, to leave their home and families with whom they’ve shared good things. We need to understand the necessity for letting go.

I have had a great privilege of a life. I have had the time and the guidance to develop my spirituality. I think it is important to say that being a nun does not make you “spiritual” in any special way. To think caringly about someone is to pray; and to love someone is to pray. I have a line from something I read: it goes “I’ve lived and I’ve seen the blossoms.” This is an especially treasured line for me.
Personal observations
As a Ph.D. student at Newcastle University in the mid-seventies I studied under Professor David Mowatt. Mowatt was a distinguished medievalist whose work on the *Nibelungenlied* (Mowatt 1962) remains a contemporary classic. His other academic signature was a commitment to literary criticism in its New Literary Criticism forms. Having worked with Northrop Frye¹ in Canada, Mowatt’s often trenchant use of literary criticism occasionally earned him reviews with the term “iconoclast” being fairly prominent. Mowatt’s New Literary Critical approach was a way of examining a literary text to which I also became committed. I wrote my first journal article using structural elements from archetypical patterning (Croft 1973), submitted my thesis on the major novels of Hermann Broch (Croft 1975) using a critical methodology of literary criticism, obtained my doctorate and then spent my professional life in administration and education developing a particular and later interest in training for aged care work (Croft 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015).

Over the past decade my personal, business and research interests have been centred upon the intersection of spirituality and aged care. On a personal level I have been the carer for both parents until their deaths; on a business level I have trained and written text books on aged care; and as a research student I sought to better understand the nexus between ageing and spirituality. This latter journey arose from the question ‘why are the patriarchs old?’ Initially I thought the question would be answered through a set of more or less direct scriptural correspondences between “old” people/things and other clear entities. But as with much to do with this research I was to be wrong footed in this initial search for simple linkages. Initially I thought I knew the scriptures reasonably well. I had my own childhood oversight of the Old and New Testaments and for specific studies I had selectively chosen episodes and subjected them to literary critical analysis. But when I began to read the scriptures as an entire textual world the Bible became a very strange place indeed. I had to re-set my expectations of direct symbolic linkages and address the complex way old age and old age issues were working in the text – at least as revealed by a literary critical hermeneutic.

As I have argued in the Biblical narratives of the study old age in the Scriptures actually acts as a marker for nuanced discussions around human spirituality. There is indeed a background dynamic which places old age as wisdom against old age as decline. However the simple

¹ Northrop Frye’s works were not only seminal contributions to literary criticism they also concentrated on the Bible as literature. Both the *Anatomy of Criticism* and *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* reflect this dual contribution.
interplay between old age as wisdom and old age as decline does not capture the complexities surrounding old age and associated issues of humankind’s spirituality at work in the Old and New Testaments. This became a hard won insight which for a time became diverted into issues around Moses and the role of the Feminine in terms of scriptural insights into spirituality. Some of the thinking occasioned by this diversion has made its way into the Scriptural studies – especially where orthodoxy and inappropriate relationship to the Feminine are important.

However, the most impactful event which caught me off balance was the collection and write-up of the spiritual experiences and stories of the seventeen participants. I was not prepared for the richness of experience, detail and complexity of issues which arose from these largely hidden stories of “everyday” older individuals. I was not prepared for their power and their capacity to move me. Perhaps I was also fearful that I would find the narrow-minded “religious” individual commonly present in some of the social science research; or I would find a Richard Dawkin’s world of delusion and inflexibility (Dawkins 2006) occasioned by a belief in a vengeful Old Testament God. But instead I found a feisty tolerance in the “orthodox” Christians; an expansive and creative spiritual landscape populated by individuals whose memories, and reflections upon them, sustained them emotionally; and a cohort whose individual members without exception valued and sought broadly to emulate a “Christian” way of living. It is true that the spiritual life of this cohort was largely lived in an undisclosed fashion – but this is much more a problem occasioned by the scorn they fear directed at them by public intellectuals and other members of the community than it is by their doubting their spiritual experiences.

And perhaps they are right to be fearful. It is clear that one of the signatures of Western culture is a kind of ferocious intellectual courage. We are a contentious people. From both our Abrahamic and Ancient Greek forebears we have argued over just about everything; and our fearlessness in considering all manner of improbable and dangerous options has yielded us wonderful things. And yet today we stand in some sense apart from ourselves – lacking that human courage to confront our contemporary spiritual selves. There are of course sorts of responses in our modern society to a human spirituality which in the end will not be denied. We have delusional responses where individuals disconnect from those everyday realities hard won through the intellectual efforts of science, technology and medicine and return to earlier behaviours and beliefs around such things as magic and religious fundamentalism. And so consequently we have the railings of public intellectuals against
“religion”; and have the uncomfortable experience of on one hand acknowledging the rightness of their anger at the life-denying and evil acts done in religion’s name; and on the other hand experiencing frustration at the way human spirituality is made to mean the same as fundamentalism. In the case of Western Christianity, this particularly means the Scriptures are read and selected in a limited story book fashion rather than interrogated according to the open ‘scientific’ approach these public intellectuals would apply to their own scientific research fields.

On balance however my personal journey through the collection and writing up of the spiritual narratives of older individuals has left me hopeful and respectful of the irrepressible quality of our spiritual selves. One human individual’s delight in telling their story to another human individual listening in delight to that story is where we locate our identity and our self-meaning – both as individuals and as cultural communities. In the end all personal narrative is spiritual. So let me end this study with my own small personal spiritual narrative. Of a morning I sometimes sit in my living room and look out the front windows at a distant telegraph pole which rises above the roof tops on a hill some way across the road. It looks just like a large wooden crucifix standing above the houses. I feel somewhat uncomfortable with the image because I find the brutality of the crucifix unsettling and difficult to relate to. But as I look at the cross I see that it is empty. Instead it now appears to be the mast of a ship – sailing incongruously somewhere in the sky. And so I somewhat aimlessly pursue these images. I do know that this is neither a cross nor a ship’s mast. Yet a human and cultural inheritance allows my mind to pleasantly drift and to transform a random, rather ordinary telegraph pole positioned against the suburban sky into sustained speculative play. This wandering among images is joyful and the wonder of being a spiritual human.

Helen Croft
24th June 2015, Brisbane
Feast of St John the Baptist
APPENDIX C
NARRATIVE PROMPTS

The interviewer may use some or all the following triggers to encourage participants to share their stories in as much detail as possible:

- Are there any experiences you have had, which you would describe as “spiritual”? Please tell me about them.
- What made you describe this experience as “spiritual”?
- Do you think about this experience much?
- Do these sorts of experiences happen more often now you are older?
- Has the experience (or experiences) changed the way you:
  - Behave
  - Look at life
- Has this experience led you to review/re-think anything from the past?
- Has the experience helped you in any way to deal with your ageing?
- Have you told anyone else about your experience/s?
  - What was their reaction?
- Do you now – or have you in the past – taken part in any sort of spiritual engagement for example such as meditation? Please tell me about them.
- Have you ever actively been a member of a church or similar group? Please tell me which one.
- Do you look for spiritual guidance from anyone? Who?
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Table **Appendix D** Spiritual narratives map
<table>
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<th>SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES MAP (cont.)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Private</strong></td>
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<td>(45) Never discusses</td>
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<tr>
<td>(44) Meaning of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(43) After-life - heaven/hell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(42) Sense of destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(41) Smallness of man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(40) Fragility of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(39) Reflects on childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(38) Pessimistic future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(37) Belief in future or destiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(36) Old age is special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(35) Power of prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(34) Sees auras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(33) Uses Reiki therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(32) Uses Tarot readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(31) Uses chakravants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(30) Dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(29) Has spirit guides/saints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(28) Uses visual aids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(27) Meditates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(26) Strong visualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25) Reaching on - departing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(24) Feels spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23) Sees / hears spirits</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Participant</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17</td>
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### Table Appendix E  Confiming spiritual narratives map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience changes</th>
<th>x</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirits are supportive</td>
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<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexplainable experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger of experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal dislocation</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estatic/Wow experience</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family stories/memories</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-visioning</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family trauma</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saved from death</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power/love of nature</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender issues</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of family</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees dead loved ones</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardship</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>Pioneer background</td>
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<td>Values tolerance</td>
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<td>Lives practical Christian values</td>
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<td>Christian</td>
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<td>Conservative religious background</td>
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<td>Atheist/Respects some religious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>p16</td>
<td>p7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Never discusses | x | x |
| Meaning of life | | x |
| After life - heaven/hell | | x |
| Sense of destiny | x |
| Smallness of man | | |
| Fragility of life | | |
| Reflects on childhood | | x |
| Pessimistic future | | |
| Belief in future/destiny | | |
| Old age is special | | x |
| Power of prayer | | x |
| Sees auras | | |
| Uses Reiki therapy | | |
| Uses Tarot readings | | |
| Uses clairvoyance | | |
| Dreams | | |
| Has spirit guides/saints | | x |
| Uses visual aids | | |
| Meditates | | x |
| Strong visualization | | x |
| Reaching out-departing | | |
| Sees/senses spirits | | x |
| Feels spirits | | x |
| Participant | p16 | p7 |
Research Topic: Spirituality and Ageing - contemporary spiritual narratives of older individuals

INFORMATION SHEET

Who is conducting the research?

Senior Investigator: Dr Anne Dawson  
Member, research team: Dr Sarah Rickson  
Member, research team: Dr Helen Parker

Why is the research being conducted?

Personal storytelling and a personal involvement with spirituality have been identified with successful ageing. Theological researchers have an interest in understanding this connection between ageing and spirituality from a number of perspectives: (1) does the way the “informed” community speak about spirituality reflect the spiritual experiences of older individuals? (2) can we use insights provided by the spiritual narratives of older individuals to improve ministry to older Australians? This research could also make a contribution to the broader social and health discussions regarding successful ageing in our contemporary society.

What will you be asked to do?

If you volunteer to be a participant in this research you will be asked to tell me about those experiences which you describe as “spiritual” and which you personally have had at times in your life.

I will be taping these stories which you tell me and writing them up as a narrative. We will meet at least once again and you can review my work and let me know if there are changes or more details to add to your experience.

If you still have the time (and patience) we will meet a third time and we will once more go over your story and check any reflections I have made on them.
The basis for selection
All participants will self-select. If there are more volunteers than can work with, selection will be based on ease of access in terms of location and times.

The expected benefits of the research
The potential benefits of this research are: (1) to ensure that there is not a gap between the expert community and older Australians in talking about spiritual experiences; (2) to better prepare individuals for their ministry work with older Australians; and (3) to contribute to the broader social and health fields of study associated with successful ageing.

Risks to you
There are no identifiable risks to you as a result of participating in this research.

Your confidentiality
No identifiable data will be collected. Your stories will be collected with the view to maintaining your privacy. The chance to review your stories on two occasions will allow you to satisfy yourself as to the story's accuracy and to the maintenance of your privacy.

Your participation is voluntary
Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the interviews at any time.

Questions/further information
If you have any further questions about the research you can contact:

Helen Parker

The ethical conduct of this research
Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project you should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4475 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

Feedback to you
There will be no basis for individual feedback as a result of the research. However, the outcome of the research will be offered as a presentation to the organisation where we find met.

Privacy Statement
Your privacy rights will be respected at all stages of the research.
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NOTE: Spiritual story websites

There are websites called your.spiritual.story.com where individuals including old people are invited to contribute their spiritual short story. See <http://www.spiritual-short-stories.com/> and <http://www.spiritual-experiences.com/real-spiritual-stories.php>.