



**LGBTQ identity, religion and spirituality:
A research report back to participants**



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We have been conducting a study about how people in Halifax experience religion and spirituality in relation to their LGBTQ identities, and how that may relate to health and to personal and community well-being. The response to recruitment was overwhelming; we had to call a halt after 35 interviews. Clearly the topic has tapped into something that some people want to talk about. This report summarizes some of what we heard from people we interviewed. Sorry – it is long! It’s just too hard not to include people’s words!

There are two major kinds of research: quantitative research that uses numbers, and qualitative research that uses stories and words. They are each good at doing some things, and not so good at doing other things. This is a qualitative study, where we interviewed participants. So it doesn’t allow us to draw conclusions about the community as a whole (e.g. “X% of LGBTQ people in Halifax have experienced...”). But it does allow us to explore in depth the experiences of some individuals from our community.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 68, with 11 in the 20-30 age group, 13 in the 31-50 age group and 11 in the 51+ age group. About $\frac{2}{3}$ were Caucasian, and $\frac{2}{3}$ were raised in Atlantic Canada. There were 19 women, 11 men, 4 transgender or gender queer, and 1 other gender; 21 identified as gay or lesbian, 4 as bisexual, 7 as queer, 1 as heterosexual and 2 as other. Four were raised in non-Christian faiths, two were raised with no faith tradition, the rest grew up in Christian traditions with varying degrees of intensity. Four studied theology or divinity in four different Christian traditions. The participants included clergy as well as deacons and church elders.

Among the Christian participants, we have categorized people as having been raised ‘intensely’ or ‘somewhat’ Christian. This is a distinction we have imposed, not their words. The 11 participants we consider raised ‘somewhat’ Christian grew up with organized religion, may or may not have attended church regularly, were not very involved beyond that, and typically did not have much if any discussion of religion at home. They were raised with Catholic, Anglican, Salvation Army, and a few mixed faith traditions. The 18 participants we categorize as raised ‘intensely’ Christian mostly grew up in Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic and Pentecostal/fundamentalist/ evangelical faith traditions. Two were raised in the United Church. All of these participants were heavily involved, usually in youth groups, choir, Bible study. They led church camps, were altar boys, became church elders or deacons, studied theology, and so on. Religion was usually talked about at home, and often was central to family, schooling and community.

We have assigned pseudonyms to all participants, to protect privacy. When we omit words in quoting someone’s interview, we indicate this with an ellipse (3 dots) ... to show the omission. When we add words to clarify a quote, we [put them in square brackets].

One theme that dominated our interviews was harms to LGBTQ people such as shame, guilt, sex negativity, disconnection from body, and severing of relationships to self and others, including community, family, and friends. We also examine how people said they managed to reconcile or reintegrate their LGBTQ selves and their spiritual selves. Lastly, we explore how people talked about the place of spirituality in LGBTQ communities today.

Absence of internal conflict, shame and guilt

The participants who were raised Jewish or atheist (aged 22 to 68) did not appear to have internal conflicts as they reconciled their LGBTQ identities with other beliefs and values. One was raised by one Jewish and one Protestant parent, neither of whom really practiced. Two people were raised in Conservative Jewish traditions, one in Reform Judaism. Two were raised in families that were not particularly observant, were more secular – though they still attended Hebrew school. For them, being Jewish was more about connection with a people than religion or spirituality.

“I felt this was my people. I felt a strong connection. And the history of the culture. I wouldn’t say I was that religious and observant. I did go to services at high holidays which, and sometimes on Friday evening or Saturday morning. But basically the connection was with the Jewish people.” (Isaac)

Two participants had grown up observing Shabbat/Shabbos, attending Hebrew school and attending synagogue/shul. Saul experienced it as more cultural than spiritual, while for Deborah Judaism provided a deep sense of right and wrong:

“Judaism was very much my moral compass; like, it was very much rooted in how to be a better person. ... It’s such a huge part of who I am, and how I see the world and how I navigate the world and my relationship to everything from food to money to sex and gender.”

For Isaac, too, Jewish beliefs provided direction for living a moral and ethical life, at both individual and community levels.

None of the Jewish participants experienced religious or spiritual shame in relation to being LGBTQ. Saul suggested that while Jewish teachings assumed heterosexuality, they were not overtly homophobic. Isaac had simply heard no mention of homosexuality in Jewish teachings while he was growing up. He thought it was “beyond the pale” for Jews, only non-Jewish people could be gay. The rabbis Deborah had encountered growing up were highly supportive of LGBTQ rights. She had no concerns about coming out as queer in the Reform Jewish community.

In general, the non-Christian participants did not experience a lot of internal conflict, guilt and shame. This may be because they were not exposed to teachings about sin and evil, but it may also be because three of them identified as transgender. Two other participants who identified as transgender or gender fluid, who were raised Christian, also experienced little or no conflict between spiritual and religious beliefs and gender identity. It is possible that the messages from organized religions concerning gender identity and transgender have been less explicitly intolerant than the messages of some faith traditions about sexual orientation.

Internal conflict, shame and guilt

For 18 participants who were raised Christian, internal conflicts had been intense. Two of these were raised 'somewhat' Christian, 16 were raised intensely Christian.

Several people talked about a kind of pervasive shame as they struggled to come to terms with their LGBTQ selves. For example, Natasha (raised Catholic) said,

“I didn't have barriers of guilt regarding what God specifically would think. But I did have the internalized shame associated with sexuality that just gets conditioned into you, if you're part of the church from a very young age.” (Natasha)

Having absorbed messages about homosexuality more from his Catholic family than at church, Sam learned to see same-sex desire as “something dirty, to be ashamed of, to be hidden.” With prevalent messages about gay people being “child molesters,” he feared, “Am I going to become a monster?” Daniel, too received messages indirectly from his extremely religious parents. Sexuality in general was treated as disgusting, and his same-sex attractions plagued him as a youth:

“I must be a very bad person. And God must think that— I'm going to have to go back to the altar, every week, to make sure that I'm clean, and that I'm forgiven, because this is disgusting. This is awful. I am an awful person, for me to be thinking like this every day. I must not be good. How can there be any good in me?” (Daniel)

He described his self-worth at the time as “a zero, it was just a negative quantity for me. I really believed that in God's sight, I must be an awful person.” He believed he was “hell bound.” Cathy had also learned implicitly from her Catholic upbringing that homosexuality left her hell-bound, though she remembered no explicit teachings. When she first kissed another girl she thought, “Well, I'm going to go to hell if I do this. I can't do this. I'll go to hell. That's fact.”

Lee-Anne's Catholic family was relatively liberal, but she learned from a group of more conservative peers: “The group of friends I had in junior high, high school and up to [age] 26 was very conservative, so, it was 'gay is a sin' and all this.” Deirdre had been very involved in an evangelical church, yet quit while coming out in her early 20s “because I just felt a tremendous amount of guilt.” She lost her personal connection to God, because “I didn't think He'd accept me.” She stopped praying or talking to God: “I stopped, really, talking or even thinking about, because the two together, being gay and being Christian, they had no connection.” At the time of our interview, at age 27, she was still somewhat afraid of hell: “Part of me is a little scared, I guess. Like, you get taught if you don't follow into this path of righteousness, you're going to hell and all this stuff.” In contrast, Will refused to believe homosexuality was wrong, and challenged religious messages on theological grounds. Yet after he was outed to his church in his late teens, he discovered they were teaching other youth that he was going to hell.

Amani tried to be “saved” in her evangelical church at age 17, hoping it would “make [her] straight, forever. But it didn't.” At the time of our interview, at age 28, she was really struggling: “I don't know, I just can't figure out a way to be okay with being gay and being Christian at the same time. ... I can't find that connection to be okay being gay.” She described a pervasive lack of self worth, and though she still defined as Christian, she said, “I don't know, I sometimes feel like God shouldn't be loving me, for being gay.” At times, she really wanted not to be gay. Kyle too, still struggled with being gay and spiritual. He reported that in his 20s, “I accepted that I was gay, I accepted that I had faith. I accepted a lot of things, but I wasn't okay with it.” Yet at age

30, he still felt some sense of disconnection: “I’m okay with myself and okay with being gay, but I think maybe there will always be a little tinge of discomfort, because of my spirituality. I think that internally, they can conflict with each other.”

Similarly, Melanie had left her evangelical Christian church in high school, “But I still believed a lot of that stuff. Or feared that that was the way it was; that there was some horrible deity that was watching, and just waiting for an opportunity to land on you like a ton of bricks.” Dale came out to his Anglican family quite young, and does not recall a lot of religious messages about homosexuality, yet near the end of our interview he spoke about negative social stereotypes of LGBTQ persons as based in religion, and as affecting him as well as the LGBTQ community more generally:

“Those stereotypes have been put in place by society. And, religion is probably a main driver behind it. So therefore, religion, even in my own personal experience, has led to some form of self-hatred. That’s definitely going to have a negative impact. It’s got to be detrimental to any person, to go through any long period of time feeling that they are less than, that they are not worthy of, that they are not sufficient; that they’re bad, they’re evil, that they’re potential pedophiles just waiting to—” (Dale)

Sex-negativity

A particular focus for shame as people struggled to integrate LGBTQ selves and spiritual or religious selves was sex and bodies. Several participants experienced church teachings as intensely sex-negative, and especially concerning same-sex desire. Raised Catholic, Jardine said, “Conversations about sexuality and sex and homosexuality were always very negative. And more than homophobia, ... what I think was more problematic for me was the intensely sex-negative attitude.” She described the “unlearning” of “things that were embedded in me through Catholicism” as “a very long process.” Similarly, Sam described his early 20s as being about “unlearning the sex-negative and homophobic baggage of my upbringing as a working class Catholic in Cape Breton.” Cathy had also been raised Catholic, and said “there was just like a general feeling of shame, and sex-negativity.”

Dierdre had learned from several denominations she attended, ““Oh my goodness, masturbation, that’s terribly wrong,’ you know? I had a lot of issues with that. Ashamed. I was very ashamed... More so dealing with sexuality just in general, not even specific to gender.” Others echoed the idea that messages that even masturbation was wrong taught them that bodies and sexual feelings generally were negative. They didn’t all believe it, though. As Lee-Anne said,

“One of the biggest points I have with the Catholic doctrine is like, masturbation. It’s like, you can’t even masturbate. I’m like ‘So what you’re saying is I’m required to let somebody else know my body before I do?’ No. That’s just not going to happen.” (Lee-Anne)

She described herself as doing “some cherry picking on those particular doctrines.”

Daniel described his conservative Christian family as conveying disgust about sexuality in general:

“We could watch a little bit of television, and if there was any reference made to sexuality, (gasps), you know, ‘Isn’t that awful? And isn’t that disgraceful? And isn’t

that disgusting?’ And you know, it was just, like, ‘Oh, the sexuality thing is just something that I shouldn’t be thinking about. It’s just devil’s play.’ And you know, it was the worst thing that I could involve myself with.” (Daniel)

He tried to avoid thinking about sex, talk about sex or even masturbating, and was afraid of betraying erections in the school locker room. Melanie echoed these experiences, from her evangelical upbringing: “Sexuality itself was so shameful that homosexuality was just, it was beyond shameful. It was literally unspeakable.”

Delaying sexual activity

Several participants spoke of simply not engaging in sex at all when they were younger. Raised Catholic, and struggling with bisexuality, Natasha avoided sex for a long time, “and so much of it was just this internalized shame that was associated with having sex.” When she did have sex with a male partner, she experienced tremendous shame, and self-loathing.

“It just all compounded to the point where I felt disgusted with myself, for being sexual. And I felt disgusted by the idea of being sexual with somebody, even if I knew that that person loved me, I still felt really weird and just wrong, thinking about having sex with someone. And it took a very, very long time for me to get over that.”

Similarly, when Kyle finally had a sexual encounter with a man, well into his 20’s, a lot of early messages arose:

“It started bringing up things like, no sex before marriage and things like that. They were still really ingrained in me. And really came to the forefront sometimes, when I least expected it, something would kind of come out. And I would be like, ‘Why do I still think that?’” (Kyle)

Other participants, too, found initial sexual intimacy with a partner frightening and challenging. As Cathy said, “I didn’t have sex until quite late, because I thought it was, you know, wrong. I couldn’t have sex. ... I was just super ashamed.” Clare found it easy to avoid any sexual activity until well into her 20s, because Catholics professed abstinence before marriage. As Sylvie said, when she finally did have sex with another woman, she “had a very, very, very difficult time being intimate with her.” She wasn’t sure this was due to her Catholic upbringing, because it was complicated by also having been sexually abused. Similar confusion was described by several other participants.

Amani had been raised in a culture where holding hands among girls was very common. Yet she always restrained herself around physical touch with friends, fearing her body might betray her and someone would realize she was attracted to girls: “I never held hands with the girls I was friends with, mostly ‘cause I’m like, ‘What if you think I like you in a way that I shouldn’t?’ Like, ‘I’m not going to hold hands with you at all.’” In fact several of these participants seemed to avoid or delay sexual encounters altogether until they had done some work integrating LGBTQ and religious or spiritual selves. Sam described himself as distanced from his own body for a while, with “hangups about sexuality, in general, not just being gay in particular, and my body.... Within the Catholic Christian tradition that I was raised in sex was essentially viewed as a necessary evil.” Consequently, he was fairly sexually inactive well into his 20s. Similarly, Beth described herself as having been “a disembodied head” until she was in her 40s. After she began to integrate her body into her sense of self, it was really only in her late 40s (24 years after

coming out) that she began to fully engage around sex: “First time I’ve ever really gotten into sex toys, or understood lesbian sex completely.”

Kyle also avoided sex to a large extent until he was into his 20s, putting his sexuality “on the back burner”: “I wasn’t seeking a relationship with anyone. I wasn’t engaging in sexual behaviour and things like that. I was very much kind of a, a neutral body, I guess.” Dierdre used almost the same language, describing herself as putting sexuality on the “back burner... didn’t even think about it... never dated until I was twenty two.” Till that point, she saw herself as asexual. She never even masturbated: “It would have just brought up guilt. So I think I just buried it. Yeah. It was just non-existent.” Though he didn’t necessarily forego sex until his 20s, Benjamin said, “I’ve been not in my body, like, from my childhood, or not in consciousness of existing in some way.” He experienced himself as “not existing physically” for years. He has had difficulty being present, and remembering the dates, places, people of his own history. Only in recent years, through gender transition and exploring his masculinity and spirituality, is he starting to be present to emotions and his inner life.

Denying the self

Obviously in considering the ways participants put their sexual selves and exploration of their bodies and emotions on hold for extended periods, it is evident that some of them severed relationships with themselves to a certain extent. Lee-Anne, for example, knew she was bisexual in high school, yet denied it for many more years: “I could somewhat hide behind the fact that I was still attracted to men... I never really mentioned that other part of myself, which was difficult because it was just, I really denied a part of who I was.” At 33, she has never disclosed to her family or her friends in her hometown. She didn’t exactly experience internal conflict while grappling with her sexuality and her religion, rather she experienced them as totally separate. Asked if she prayed about it when coming out to herself, she said: “I’ve never really, I just kind of, I tried never tried to think about it. And it was just, it was almost that there was a separation between those. There was the two—” She and her friends had prayed to save the gay people, and she could not begin to imagine praying for acceptance of her own bisexuality.

Ross was raised in a “very Catholic” family, and early on, “I decided I wanted to be worthwhile and successful, and I just went ‘So I’m not going to be gay.’” He didn’t see any way to be both gay and worthwhile. He wasn’t as concerned with sin as with church membership: “You can’t be part of the church if you’re gay.” He denied his feelings for men for about 30 years. Others spoke of persistent feelings of lack of self worth, or feeling unlovable.

Will attended several conservative Christian churches, yet rejected any explicit teachings against homosexuality on theological grounds. He was sexually active from early adolescence, but kept his gay self and his Christian self totally separate for many years.

“I used to have to segregate it in my body, in my mind. It’d be like, ‘Okay, with my gay friends, I do gay things. And we talk about gay things. And with my Christian friends, we talk about Christian things and Biblical things and conservative things. And if I’m with people I’m having sex with, then it’s just sex.’ But today, it’s all together. Because segregation makes a person crazy.”

Beth had been out for many years, yet felt a high degree of separation from herself until her mid-40s: “It took me a long time to fully be myself. I think I tried to pass as not a lesbian in a lot of

situations, for most of my life, until the last couple years.” She described herself as judging other LGBTQ people who were “too” obvious: “I would judge people and just say ‘Oh my God, you know, she looks like such a dyke.’” As she grew to accept herself, in part through her spiritual practice, she grew to also accept others.

Using religion to ‘heal’ LGBTQ desires

Not only did participants deny or separate from parts of themselves, but some, like Peter, called on their faith to remove unwanted desires from them. Peter saw his same-sex attractions and occasional encounters as shameful, less because they were sexual than because he was failing himself as a Christian: “I thought ‘It’s wrong. It’s just, you know, dig deeper into your spirituality and that will go away.’ And it didn’t.” He experienced “extreme shame. Extreme shame. ... That I’m not, even though I may be a deacon, I might be an elder, I’m not successful at it, because these feelings would go away if, if spiritually— I’m disappointing myself.” He prayed for redemption: “There wouldn’t be a day that I wouldn’t pray to God that that desire would be taken away. ... It drove me nuts.”

Some participants engaged in church programs or practices to try to rid themselves of same-sex attraction. At one point, Peter confessed his attractions to his new minister, who tried to help him address them through a Christian program that aims to heal sexual and relational brokenness:

“He put me on this Living Waters program, and all I would do is listen to the tapes and hear a voice that was so distinctively gay confessing that he was healed and he was all better (laugh). ... Well, I fantasized what he looked like! (laugh) Honestly, the more intense the procedures to deny it, the more real it became.”

Similarly, when she was 14, Dierdre did The Bondage Breaker with her best friend’s mother. She described it as a Christian program to break bad thoughts, patterns such as “astrology or gambling or, ah, sexual thoughts like masturbation and same sex thoughts, taking that and condemning it, and basically saying it’s of the devil. It’s kind of like a mini exorcism. Not as extreme, but it has similar roots.” Four years later, still questioning faith and her sexuality, she went to an evangelical Bible college for a year.

Some participants were not willing participants in church attempts to free them from same-sex desires. When at age 16 Kyle was confronted by his pastor concerning same-sex attractions, he refused to let the congregation pray for him, to cure his homosexuality. The pastor said he was being defiant, refusing help, and would need to leave and find his way back to God on his own. He did leave, but he also told the few friends he had come out to that it was no longer true: “I kind of changed it up and said that I was experimental and that I didn’t mean to say that I was gay, kind of thing... I still knew I was gay, but it kind of pushed me further back in [the closet].”

Will was also confronted by church leaders, asked to meet with the elders and deacons. Some church members “wanted to lay hands on me and pray over me, to get the demon of homosexuality out of me.” The minister said he would be excommunicated unless he agreed to go to a program in the U.S. designed to ‘cure’ homosexuals. He went. “All the people that were there were at the point of being excommunicated from their family and from the communities that they knew, so it was the only option that they had.” He lasted 7 months, even enduring shock ‘therapy,’ then left. When he made his way home again, the church leaders told him there was no place for him in the church.

Severing of relationships with others: loss of community, friends

Those who were encouraged to leave a church because they were LGBTQ usually experienced profound loss. Often the church was their entire social network, encompassing family, friends community and sometimes source of employment. Those who were highly active in their faith tradition – clergy, youth group leader, choir, deacon, elder – lost those organizational roles when they came out (or were outed). Others lost friends and community. And several lost connections with family. All but 1 of the ‘intensely’ Christian participants described such losses, and that one had already left family and community for other reasons.

Others, too, experienced loss, whether they left a faith tradition willingly or were pushed out. Some mourned the loss of a relationship with God, most mourned the loss of church community. As Jennifer said, “What I haven’t been able to pick up and perhaps I haven’t gone looking hard enough yet, is that sense of community. You know, when you’re no longer part of an active worshipping congregation, where you’re with a set group of people, you know, ... where does the Christian community come? I haven’t figured that one out yet. It’s a little isolating.”

When Kyle was confronted by his pastor and essentially asked to leave his church, he felt totally abandoned by the loss of community:

“I’d never felt so alone in my life, and I’d never felt so unsupported in my life, once I started coming out and once that, I was confronted. ... I lost a lot, when I needed them the most... It really felt like my heart broke, because there was nothing there... I think that I still haven’t gotten over the break up. (laugh)”

Dierdre had left her evangelical church in her early 20s, and hadn’t found anything to replace that sense of connection: “I miss the community. And that passion that comes along with that belief system.” She went on to say, “all through growing up and through Bible college, you develop this emotional closeness to the people that you’re spending time with. Especially at Bible college. We were like a family.”

Peter and his wife were both heavily involved in their Pentecostal church: “Really, our community didn’t expand outside of the church. Our friends would have all been in the church.” When Daniel left an intense Christian community, in his 40s, he experienced deep loneliness with the loss of church community: “The depth and the profound despair that there was for me, of being alone and just not knowing how to make my way in the world. The loneliness was— As we talk— I forgot about how lonely it was.” Sarah had grown up in a very small community, where virtually everyone was part of the same faith tradition. She had never felt completely at home in the church, nor was she “officially rejected or excommunicated” because she left home before coming out as lesbian. But her gay brother was outed to the community and did go through that experience, which Sarah witnessed as a teen:

“It wasn’t an excommunication but... he got a ‘release’ which means you’re no longer a member in good standing ... He’s just recently talked about his pain and anguish from that whole process... These things are embarrassing and painful when you’re in a small tight knit community.”

Sarah suggested most LGBTQ Christians have similar stories of trying to belong to a faith tradition and eventually feeling the pain of utter rejection.

Cathy expressed the complex sense of both freedom and loss that many participants found accompanied leaving a church:

“When I left the church, even though I was happy about it for a little while, it then came back to haunt me in a sort of sad feeling. Like, ‘Well, I had that whole community and now it’s gone. And now I don’t know what faith I have and I wouldn’t even be welcome there. Like, they wouldn’t even have me. And I don’t want them anyway. If they can’t accept me, then fuck it; I don’t want them.’ But still, it was a big void...”

Clare specifically named the loss of her faith tradition as loss of connection to ritual:

“I really miss ritual, that has not been replaced in my life and I certainly do miss that a lot. There’s a lot of comfort in the familiar, and you know, ritual around a very dogmatic approach to religion can be very comforting and very anchoring in times of uncertainty. ... I miss ritual that is not attached to a church. That’s a tough one, I think, for people to find that community of ritual.”

Loss of family relationships

Loss of (or damage to) family connections was even more common than loss of church community. Some simply grew steadily more distant from family, especially if they were out with friends but not with family. Even those who maintained good relationships with family had to find ways to navigate beliefs carefully. Sarah, for example, was close with her family in part because she had moved away: “The way I chose to continue my life was leave. I left my community that I grew up in. I left, essentially, my family. And I didn’t think of it as a loss then.” The physical distance is becoming harder as her parents age. And she still navigates differences in beliefs: “Even if I don’t think I’m going to burn in hell, my parents still do, to some degree.”

Cathy’s mother eventually came around, but for years was convinced that Cathy would go to hell: “It was very painful.... It was sad for a couple years.” When Marie came out to her parents at age 18 her parents were so upset she moved out that night. For several years she made steady attempts to heal relations with her father, but he would not budge until she confronted him directly, insisting that he make some effort too. It took about 15 years to heal the divide.

Beth essentially lost connection with her parents for all of her early adulthood: “I just pretty much didn’t talk to them, didn’t have much to do with them.” Her father was a minister, and her lesbianism “just went against everything they ever believed.” They still don’t want to know about her relationships, but she has a reasonably good connection with them otherwise.

“I lost years of a good relationship with my parents. It took a long, long time. ... That’s definitely a huge loss: fifteen years of a good relationship with my parents. ... My father has been horrible to me, horrible. Like every three to five years, he would just rip me a new one. ... He would just say horrible things to me... it was pretty devastating. (voice breaks) ... There were times were things were good. But, I never have been able to really talk about my life with them.”

Clare too, lost over 15 years of connection with her parents, “years of what I call the black out. (laugh).” She describes coming out to her Catholic family as “a disaster. And I probably didn’t come out to them until I was 32, because I knew I could lose all of them.” She started

reconnecting with siblings in her mid-40s, and with her parents at age 49. They missed huge parts of her life during that time:

“I fell in love; I bought my first home. I got married. I had two kids. [I: And your parents were not there for any of it?] None of it, no. No. None of it. Yeah. ... it’s very sad. And the absence is very profound. ... Then it becomes normal. And you get used to it.”

Ross’s Catholic mother found out he was gay through media coverage of some activism he was involved with in his 50s. She suggested suicide would be a better option for him:

“I said to her something about ‘You know, if I don’t do this kind of thing, there’s going to be young people who are going to commit suicide because they’re gay.’ And she said to me ‘Maybe that would have been better if it happened to you.’ I said to her, ‘That is the most hate-filled thing that anyone has ever said to me.’ ... And for about three or four years after that, we were basically estranged.”

She didn’t even want Ross to attend her funeral. Three years later she apologized.

Negative effects on health and well-being

About half of the 35 participants had faced some struggles with mental health, whether or not that was directly connected to their religious or faith tradition. Several experienced depression, some were cutting or harming themselves, and several had been suicidal at least once. Some described anxiety disorders and panic attacks. A few struggled with low self-esteem, body image issues, and a pervasive sense of not being worthy or lovable. Some described times of extreme shame. And 4 people volunteered that the church they were raised in had taught them not to look after themselves very well. Rosa noted that Catholic beliefs against divorce kept her with an abusive husband for many years, until she finally was admitted to a psychiatric ward.

Marie did not experience direct mental health challenges herself, but her partner did. Marie described the more subtle, non-clinical, everyday effects of having been outed as LGBTQ in a Christian family and community: “I think there’s a loss of intimacy in public ways, right? That expression of affection, I guess, in my relationship with my partner, you know? Some self-censoring out in public.” She resents the fact that she is always aware of risk, even though she generally chooses to ignore it and show affection to her partner regardless.

One woman in her 20s was still actively cutting as a physical release from emotional pain. She was sometimes suicidal and was under treatment for depression. Another woman in her late 20s had come out to her mother around age 19: “It [being lesbian] was something that I had bottled up for so long. I had gotten to the point where I was cutting myself too. I was very depressed and just, I had a lot of trouble accepting myself. ... Alcohol and different things, drama, didn’t really help with the depression.” Aron felt disconnected from body until beginning to take testosterone, and hanging out with a trans community: “I think that a lot of my self-harming tendencies like, you know, physically self-harming [and] a tendency towards addiction, had to do with numbing my body.” Aron described at one point, “being really depressed and self-destructive and suicidal, ... trapped in this dysfunctional relationship, and then also dealing with a pretty serious drug addiction.”

Those who hid their LGBTQ selves for extended periods often said their depression or anxiety or suicidality lifted once they came out. They may have been lonely or more isolated, with loss of

family and community, but they felt less internal conflict. After leaving her church, Jennifer noted it was the first year in her adult life that she did not have a major depressive episode: “I think it was the stress of trying to live a double life... living that duality, that takes a dreadful toll on a person.” As Beth said, “I had my own homophobic stuff. You know, I wanted to kill myself for a while, ‘cause it was really hard for me to swallow, to go against the norm and everything.”

Only 5 participants spoke about addictions, though we also did not ask about this specifically. Will went through periods of homelessness after he was asked to leave his church for being gay. When he tried to reconnect with his former church, he was asked to meet with the elders and deacons. “They basically told me I was a horrible person. They told me that I used the church. They told me that I have no place in the church. They basically, what I would call, religiously abused me. They used their authority and they made me feel crazy. After that, I went into the mental ward, because it was that intense.” He got immersed in the drug scene: “I started doing blow in Halifax, and before I knew it, I was in Toronto in a crack den.” He was in and out of detox three times before he was 30.

Bernie knew throughout high school that he was not heterosexual, and did a lot of drugs to deal with his fear about “stigma and discrimination. It progressed to heroin after a while.” He drank and used drugs heavily throughout his 20s, in part to bury awareness of having been sexually abused by a priest for many, many years. He tried to kill himself twice, and was in and out of rehab. His liver was failing when he finally started attending Alcoholics Anonymous.

Lack of conflict: knowing theology

As noted earlier, those raised non-Christian appeared to have had substantially less conflict between their faith traditions and their LGBTQ identities, in part because anti-LGBTQ teachings were absent or less explicit. Generally, the more intensely Christian the upbringing, the more intense the internal conflict around coming out to self and others. Interestingly, those who had studied Christian theology appeared to have much less internal conflict. Quincy had been heavily involved in several conservative Christian churches, becoming an ordained elder and eventually head elder, running the Sunday school and adult bible programs, doing some preaching. He attended a Christian university. He never really struggled with being gay, because he knew from training in academic theology that scholars acknowledge considerable ambiguity regarding homosexuality in the Bible. Whereas churches may condemn it, theological texts are far more nuanced. Quincy’s conflict concerned the impact of coming out on his family and community, not on his soul: “When I was coming to terms, it was not the theology that distressed me, it was the practical consequences. ‘What will happen to my family? What will happen to my relationships?’”

One participant, who had trained as a minister, described similar turmoil. She completed seminary training, and was in her second position as a pastor when she started coming out to herself. Again, her faith did not pose conflicts for her as a lesbian, the church community did: “For me, it’s never been a theological issue. So this is not God’s problem with me. This is other people’s problem. This is the perception of some of the church community. This is not God; this is other Christians you have to worry about. (laugh) ... You know, ‘God is okay with this. It’s the people that I work with and for, how do I navigate this?’”

Another participant trained as a minister in her late 30s, and during that time fell in love with a woman. She wasn't entirely 'out' as lesbian until her late 40s. Again, she had no conflict with her religious beliefs, but the more out she was the more doors were closed to her within church circles. She did find highly satisfying positions as pastor, where congregations went out of their way to support her, as did some in leadership positions.

Lastly, Dayna was raised in the Anglican church, but has explored numerous faith traditions throughout more than 40 years. As an adult Dayna did a degree in theological studies, choosing not to take the route of ordination, since only heterosexuals were being ordained at the time. In Dayna's perspective, mainstream churches preach selective theology, governed by politics more than faith. While still Christian, Dayna does not believe blindly:

"I call myself a Christian because I believe in the concepts of what Christ taught. Even though I go to church, I do not consider myself someone who takes the Bible literally and believes all the doctrine and the dogma and everything as the word of God handed down to Moses on the mountain or whatever, and this is the way things have to be. Obviously, I can't take it that way or else I would be condemning myself, but I do consider myself a follower of Christ. His words speak and resonate with me more than a lot of other of the mainstream religions."

The (lack of) effect of age

There is a tendency to think that the harms religions can bring to LGBTQ people are a thing of the past, that as a community we have moved past that as Canada becomes an increasingly secular society. Maybe people raised in the 50's, 60's, 70's experienced pain and suffering through religious affiliations. But surely young people in their 20's are no longer facing such difficulties?

In fact, there were no age patterns in our interviews. The harms done through religion crossed age groups. Internal conflict, shame, sex-negativity, mental health struggles – these were described by participants in their early 20's and 30's, right through to those in their 60's. The same is true of losing family, friends and community. And a few participants under 30 were raised in relatively tolerant faith traditions and actually sought out more conservative churches, usually seeking a place of belonging, or emotional intensity.

Our type of study cannot say how common or uncommon these experiences are, because those who chose to talk with us did so for their own reasons. They had something they wanted to say about religion and/or spirituality. Their stories do not indicate any kind of statistical trend. Nonetheless, it is clear that the 20 and 30 year olds in the study had powerful and often damaging experiences in organized faith traditions, notably Christian ones.

Reconciliation/integration

Most participants had found ways to reconcile or integrate their spiritual and LGBTQ selves, though for some this was clearly still in progress. Some participants simply abandoned anything religious or spiritual, and had no interest in either. They were a minority (3 of 35) in this self-selected sample. Even they sometimes had other connections to either religion or spirituality. Ross, for example, has abandoned organized religion, and no longer believed in a deity, nor heaven and hell, nor an afterlife. Yet he still thought organized religions provided some

important services through doing social justice work. Sarah, too, said of all organized religions, “I don’t really have an interest in that, and haven’t for a long time.” Yet she finds sacred music, especially choral music, spiritually moving: “Sacred music to me, is sort of my expression of spirituality. And so I will go to church services, often around Christmas and Easter, for the music. Or just in general, if I know there’s a good choir.” Now in her 50s, Sarah wonders sometimes about returning to a Christian church, which she thought would have to happen through joining a choir: “It’s a social thing too, you know, the whole church going thing, it’s all about the community there too. But I’m still resistant a bit. I’m not ready to do that. But I think about it.”

Spiritual seeking

Several participants engaged in considerable spiritual seeking before they arrived at a set of beliefs for themselves, or found a faith tradition they could believe in. Such seeking seemed most common when people were in their teens and 20s, often at college or university. For example, Dale said, “I did look into paganism and Wicca when I was younger, just to learn more about it, because I felt like I am a spiritual person, but obviously not religious.” Jardine had left Catholicism in high school, but explored other teachings: “I was sort of Wiccan for a bit. I looked in a number of, I was highly appropriative for a while. (laugh) ... Yeah, I looked into a number of religions that had a spiritual connection with the natural world that made more sense to me.” She identified as spiritual, but not connected to any tradition.

Cameron had loved the symbolism, ritual, music and majesty of Catholicism, yet left over church politics in high school. At university she studied world religions, seeking something: “I went looking for space in spirituality for connection to people or exploration of the self, and you know, the morals and ethics within that. How you can experience the divine within human interaction, while being safe and respectful.” She explored New Age spirituality, Buddhism, Islam, yoga, Universalism, and others. Paulina was raised with non-practicing Christian and Jewish parents; she explored Buddhism at university, and in her early 20s at the time of the interview was still exploring: “With the self discovery [of being queer], came the interest in, like, palmistry and the tarot cards and tea leaves and the idea of like, cosmic consciousness and all of this, like the Mayans and...”

Dayna was the most intense spiritual seeker, something begun as a child. While very young, Dayna explored becoming a Catholic priest, but turned to the Anglican church because being read as a girl by others meant Dayna could not be a priest. Still a youth, Dayna also explored pyramid worship, as well as “a little bit of magick, along the lines of Aleister Crowley,” and “even approached a rabbi to become a Jew.” Dayna identifies as a seeker, “in the Christian sense, I’d be considered a mystic or a Gnostic. ... I like the mystic path, like Christian mystics like Evelyn Underhill and Meister Eckhart, and Sufism the Islamic mysticism, and the Kabbalah in Judaism...” Dayna has formally studied at least seven faith traditions, and experiences the mixing of multiple spiritual and religious traditions as seamless and highly compatible.

Remaining with the faith tradition of upbringing

Nine of the participants remained more-or-less in the religious traditions with which they were raised. This was true for 3 of the 4 Jewish participants. Saul had rejected Judaism in his teens mainly due to Zionism. At the time of the interviews, he was attending Shabbat dinner with other

left-leaning Jews, and attending shul at high holidays. He felt connected to a yearly clock, and to family, through Judaism. Yet he was also exploring other spiritual paths, particularly “earth-based spiritualities” because he does not like to “appropriate other religions.”

Isaac remained with his conservative Jewish tradition, which provided him with a moral compass, direction for living well. He feels a strong sense of community, knowing that if he does not attend synagogue they may not have “minyan,” enough people for a valid service. In his synagogue he joined committees to examine inclusiveness in rituals, and in the language of prayers, as well as to participate in decision-making concerning same-sex marriage.

Deborah also disconnected from Judaism in her late teens, due to anti-Palestine politics, but reconnected with a new way of being Jewish and anti-Zionist in her 20s. Though she finds local synagogues do not suit her needs as a queer Jewish woman, she does maintain weekly prayer and ritual, and respects all Jewish holidays. She deliberately ‘queers’ the traditions: “For me, what’s really critical about all of those rituals is leading up to the holiday or for every Shabbos, I sit with what I know to be the tradition and really sort through what makes sense for me. So I do a lot of like, queering everything, every ritual that I partake in.” She had recently held a ritual at home with friends: “I had a Seder here, that me and a friend organized. And there’s the Haggadah, which guides the Seder. And there’s hundreds and thousands of Haggadahs. And so we wrote our own, which was beautiful and really exciting, that really inserted ourselves and was for ourselves.” Deborah also emphasizes holidays like Purim, where gender play is expected: “You’re explicitly supposed to play with gender. ... cross dressing is very encouraged.” She sees Judaism as a strong fit for queer people, because of its emphasis on critical thinking:

“It’s very much a part of the tradition to critique and think through things. ... Being really critical facilitates queerness because I see those as inherently intertwined, like, queerness is about querying our sexuality but also querying everything that we do, which is about really thinking critically and not taking the *status quo*.”

Doris, Joyce and Dayna all remained with or returned to more-or-less the Christian traditions with which they had been raised. Though they may have shifted denominationally a bit, all were connected with churches that were relatively affirming of LGBTQ people. As Dayna said, “I think it’s going back to that foundation. My foundation was in Christianity and it still does resonate with me, even with all the problems within the church.”

Will, Quincy and Lee-Anne remained connected to much more conservative Christian traditions. Lee-Anne still sees herself as Catholic, though she attends a Baptist church: “I would describe my Catholicism right now as, I never stopped believing, I just stopped feeling welcome. I’m very Marian, into the doctrine, but I just stopped, at some point, just stopped feeling welcome in the church.” She still attends Catholic services at Easter and Christmas. The Baptist church she attends more regularly is affirming, and Lee-Anne feels totally comfortable there. The first time she attended, the minister preached directly about openness and that everyone has a place with God; Lee-Anne cried to feel so welcome: “I basically spent the entire Mass crying. Because like, all of a sudden, I was in the included! ... It was very, very powerful.” Nonetheless she experiences loss that she cannot find a place in the faith tradition of her preference, the Catholic church.

Though still young, Will had been asked to leave his evangelical church more than once. He kept insisting on returning: “Because it’s where I felt loved; where I felt community. It’s where I connected. I believe in community, community worship... I said ‘You know what? You’re not going to kick me out of church. The doors are still open. ... I will keep on coming back.’” After fighting through drug addictions, and finding a partner who shares his Christian faith, Will attends a Baptist church and maintains a gay Christian household. He finds less conservative Christian churches off-putting because he cannot quite pin down what they stand for, theologically.

Quincy grew up attending first one conservative Christian church, then a different one. After being abandoned by his church – more for divorce than for being gay – he returned and won some degree of acceptance. He now attends both of those churches, though he continues to find their teachings stubbornly intolerant. He feels shut down, shut out. Now partnered with a man from an evangelical background, they are seeking a place to worship regularly. A major struggle for him is that he experiences service to his church as a key part of his spiritual life:

“There’s nothing as powerful and enlivening and as confirming of the presence of God, and the power of God in our lives today, there’s nothing like that for me, like standing in the pulpit and being the conduit of the holy spirit, declaring the gospel to his people. There’s nothing more powerful than that.”

The churches with which he connects do not readily offer leadership to gay men. Yet he finds more affirming churches are not ones whose beliefs he can easily accept: “There’s an intellectual and theological engagement.”

For those who continued to believe in organized religions, the three main aspects they saw as significant were providing a moral compass – one which is not purely individual – community, and community service.

Separating religion from spirituality

For some participants, separating religion from the people and politics of a given church was central to their ability to remain with or return to a specific faith tradition. For others it was this recognition that allowed them to leave, or allowed them to approach other ways to engage with spirituality. For some, as they left a faith tradition they grew to realize they did not see religion and spirituality as intertwined.

Some participants had separated religion and the spiritual even when they were very young. Cameron for example, attended Catholic church, and loved the ritual and majesty, but did not see it as particularly spiritual: “I knew what God represented to me, but the messages coming through the official channels didn’t match what I thought God would go for (laugh).” She described her spiritual life as “intense, deep”:

“I had a powerful sense of the importance of my inner life. I was a bit enamoured with mysticism, of having that direct experience of communication, or intuition, or something from the divine... I wanted to feel close to God and to feel that direct mystic, the mysticism side of things, like a thirteen year old does.”

For Dayna, too, the spiritual had never been housed in a religious tradition. Dayna sees the divine in everything: “It’s like I can feel the heartbeat of the world... I can feel the energy of other creatures. And so, they’re part of the whole. They’re part of the whole.” Spirit for Dayna is

“just this connection (snaps fingers) between people. You can feel it. You can feel it; there is that connection, no matter what they’re doing, whether they’re being nice to you or not, there is a connection.” People, other organisms, and non-organic elements are interconnected, and understanding those connections is key to spirituality.

Kyle found it impossible to reconcile messages about love for others with the judgment he observed and experienced within the Presbyterian church. The practices of church members and leaders were not consistent with the heart of the teachings. Though many of his personal beliefs remained congruent with Christianity, he could not connect with a church: “I guess the head honchos of the Christian faith let me down so much that I refuse to give them my faith. Because I don’t think that they deserve it, because they let me down.” Also raised Presbyterian, Will said, “I still love church. I still love God, but I had an issue with the people.” Jennifer drew a similar distinction: “I consider myself blessed, having been able to make that distinction, that this is not God who has a problem with me, this is the church. This is people who have their minds bound up in an ideology that is not necessarily what I believe to be true.”

Twenty years older than Kyle, Daniel echoed his sentiment: “I don’t call myself a Christian anymore. I call myself more of a spiritual person. Because I don’t go to church. I don’t find solace in the church. I don’t find that I can worship there.” Like Daniel, Peter had left a very conservative Christian church. His beliefs had not changed: “I have exactly the same beliefs I had all my life. [I: So God is still there, in the same way?] Absolutely. But there’s no mediator. There’s no church there telling me what, how I connect with Him. It’s so liberating.” Jennifer, too, thought separating church and the spiritual was freeing: “God does not live in that white building... What is feeding your own soul and spirit? And do you need to go into a particular building to do that? I’ve let go of that, the idea that you need to do that.”

Dale went further to say that the hypocrisy he has witnessed in mainstream religions in fact blocks spirituality.

“I feel like spirituality is about being good and pure, and honest to yourself, and respect and whatever... And so, by virtue of going to an establishment – a mosque, church, whatever it happens to be – where they’re going to reject any part of that, or not follow some of that... They turn around and in a complete violation of their own codified stuff, hypocrisy goes flying all over the place.”

Clare found leaving an organized religion (Catholicism) substantially enhanced her own spiritual life:

“I think I have a far more articulated and self aware construct of spirituality than I did when I was going through the motions, because I didn’t realize I was going through the motions ... My own spirituality, while deeply framed by that ritual and by that practice, only surfaced once I was able to look at it from the outside.”

Adopting a new path or tradition

Only a few participants had moved from one faith tradition to another tradition or spiritual path, which they experienced as more open to or a better fit for them as LGBTQ people. Three women had become Buddhists as adults; two had been raised in evangelical Christian churches, one was raised nominally Catholic, though not really practicing. Rosa came to Buddhism in her early 50s, when she was in considerable turmoil, and found a “home” there: “Oh my God, it was like, it

was so familiar. It was as if something was missing, and finally I had found it. It felt so right, more than good, it was right... It was home for me.” She was coming out as lesbian around the same time, and found Buddhism extremely helpful: “One of the basics of Buddhism is that we are perfect the way we are. They teach you how to accept yourself unconditionally. ... The lesbian is one part of who you are.”

Melanie and Beth also found Buddhism central to integrating their LGBTQ identities. Melanie had been informally connected to the Shambala Buddhist community for years, then took vows in her mid-40s. To her, those vows included the intention to live truthfully, and she came out to herself almost immediately afterward: “Taking refuge [committing to Buddhism] means knowing the truth and acknowledging the truth. And this is the truth. And so it was a logical progression. It was an important part of being a Buddhist, was acknowledging that I am a lesbian.” Beth has been Buddhist for over a decade, and finds daily practice keeps her centered: “My Buddhist practice is what keeps me sane and centred. ... It affects everything, everything. I’m just much more clear and I have more joy and more compassion, I just feel stronger, mentally, emotionally.”

Similarly, for Cathy coming out as queer and leaving Catholicism for paganism (and other paths) was part of a commitment to live truthfully: “That was the beginning of me being dedicated to truth in my life.” In her early 20s, Cathy explored Wiccan beliefs and practices, particularly Starhawk’s feminist neopaganism. She has also explored Buddhist meditation and yoga, and incorporates those as daily practices. Yet in her 30s, Cathy still returns to paganism:

“A big tenant of paganism is to be responsible for one’s own actions, which I highly, highly believe in. ... I also really like the pagan holidays. I like celebrating solstice and equinox and the New Year at Halloween. I like the symbolism in paganism. And it seems more free to interpretation for me. There’s also a bit more carnal pleasure available in it, which I am very much in support of. Because I feel like I’m here for a joyful life and life is hard. And I do a lot; I have a lot of sadness, so I need to balance that with joy.”

Sam had also adopted paganism, gradually, after rejecting the Catholic church in which he was raised. In his first long-term relationship he and his partner were equally resistant to commercialized and Christian Christmas, and began exploring pagan beliefs:

“Jointly we started exploring various pagan ideas about the solstice and the annual cycle and Wicca and nature-based traditions, earth-based traditions, and that felt right. So we started developing small little things that we did as part of what we saw as ‘our holidays.’ On Solstice, we came up with this simple candle ritual that we would do on the evening of the Solstice, to end one year and to begin a new year afresh. It was something that we did together, that had meaning for us.”

Connection to the passing of seasons was important to both of them. They lost numerous friends to AIDS in the 1990s, and Sam developed a ritual of talking to the stars at night:

“This idea that the stars are the embodiment of the souls of the departed, came to me as, not necessarily literally, but as a symbolic representation. And so that’s, when I would talk to the sky, that’s what I’m doing, I’m talking to the souls of those who have touched my life (voice breaks) and now have left... that was spiritual practice.

It brought me peace. It gave me a sense of being connected to something greater than myself.”

When his former partner died, Sam organized a memorial service for him based on pagan rituals and blessings. He has found more support for paganism among lesbians than gay men, but is currently connected with a small group of gay men who identify as pagan and do occasional rituals together.

Bernie had also been raised Catholic, but left as a teen. He connected with other Aboriginal gay people in his 30s, and elders interpreted his dreams as indicating that he is two-spirited: “It’s like a gender identity. It’s not what you present outside. In other words, you balance your male and female, like, perfectly, the two spirits within me, male and female.” Two-spirited people have particular spiritual abilities and roles within community. He has found following the “red road,” an Aboriginal spiritual and life path, has helped him cope with addictions and multiple health issues, as well as relationship crises. He has a daily practice of smudging, and does regular sweats: “It cleanses you, spiritually, physically, mentally.” Guided by elders on some spiritual processes, he also creates his own rituals, “being two-spirited, we have no set rules.” Though removed from the Catholic church for over 30 years, Bernie notes that internalized Catholic training is hard to shake: “De-colonization of yourself is probably one of the worst and hardest things you can ever do. For me, it was.”

Crafting an individualized relationship to spirituality

Most commonly, participants had rejected organized faith traditions in favour of a more individualized approach to spirituality, often with connection to nature at its core. Some meditated, reflected, journaled or wrote, did yoga or tarot or listened to music, some sang. For some, private time was key, for others ritual was key; for a few the spiritual infused everyday activities, and for some the key was gathering and focusing energy alongside other people.

As Paulina said, “I take part of everything I read and have kind of made up my own thing.” Cameron, too, had borrowed from a number of traditions, saying, “I didn’t want to follow somebody else’s prepackaged notion of what was going on. I’ve picked and chosen a stew of a lot of good stuff from all over the place.” Though she has an altar in her home, and engages in intentional spiritual time, she also sees spiritual rituals in the everyday, in an evening prayer with her son, in washing dishes, in shaving her legs: “That’s a part of ritual preparation of myself for the day (laugh).” Spiritual practices help Cameron deal with difficulties, but also deepen her joy, happiness, and excitement, help her to stay receptive: “It helps me to open to life. Open to change. Open to diversity.”

For both Sarah and Cathy, music is spiritual. As Cathy described it,

“Some sort of connection, some sort of like, opening, like, my chest is open.
Because the tear usually starts in here, and I can feel like, my chest cave a little bit.
And then it comes up and out. Like, my heart is engaged. And I feel alive, maybe?
Yeah. It’s unclear. It’s hard to put language to it.”

Sarah, too, feels spiritually moved by music, particularly sacred and choral music: “There’s just something so beautiful about choral music that just makes me think ‘Oh, this is beauty. Maybe this is where—’ Well, I don’t know if God— But, you know, this makes my hair stand up.” She went on to say “Sometimes I think singing is praying.”

Rick described spirituality as an experience of “flow,” a sense of being immersed in focused energy. For him spiritual experiences involve channeling the energies of a group, regardless of who the people are and what activities they are immersed in.

“I am just as happy sitting on a cushion with the Buddhists as I am singing a four hundred year old hymn with the Catholics. ... It has to do with being with other people. ... Doing, focusing together, and I think it has something to do with— Do you know the concept of flow? It has something to do with flow and being with a bunch of people.”

Dayna might well agree with Rick, because for Dayna ritual is central to the spiritual, regardless of the source or content of the ritual: “Ritual is wonderful because that is what opens us. It unlocks us.” Dayna experiences mysticism personally, and uses ritual – particularly sound meditations, employing different harmonics – to “court” or invite visions, dreams and other spiritual experiences.

Beth’s definition of spirituality is intrinsically individual: “Spirituality is finding that place inside of yourself, and feeding that stillness or that basic goodness, finding that core goodness in yourself and feeding that.” She also argued that spirituality is extremely important to providing meaning in life:

“Life is pretty empty and meaningless without spirituality. In my belief system, you know, all this is an illusion. It’s all a dream. And it’s like, if I don’t find deeper meaning beyond going to the grocery store and watching a movie and, you know, making a buck and getting a pay cheque— I mean, it’s like, it doesn’t mean anything. I just don’t feel like life has any meaning without spirituality.”

Interestingly, Beth’s perspective was echoed by Aron, more than 20 years her junior. Raised in an atheist household, Aron finds atheism empty: “That sort of perspective feels like a, within myself, feels like an absence. I would feel like, a lacking of something, or an emptiness.” Aron believes in a sense of connection, to others and to some larger sense of purpose beyond the individual. Life has meaning, and connections beyond the physical limits of the immediate body matter.

For Clare, spirituality involves solitary time, quiet reflection. She finds particular seasons are times of heightened spiritual awareness. Yet she is concerned about raising children with such an individualized spirituality, unsure how to convey to them a spiritual life in the absence of a faith tradition.

“I want them to be really good people that think about other people, other than themselves, not just because it’s a personality trait but they’re connected to a larger flow and hope for humanity. And they don’t have that, because I don’t know how to talk about it with them or because I don’t have a ritual. ... [For me] a lot of that was ingrained through practice and ritual, that spiritual orientation.”

Clare believes in a soul, the divine in each person: “I do think there is something Divine in every little person that grows up to be an adult, that becomes corrupted or vanquished or silenced or nurtured.”

Nature as spiritual

The most consistently mentioned element connected to spirituality for participants was nature. Sylvie, for example, spoke evocatively about how nature evokes a sense of commune with the spiritual for her:

“Spirituality to me is ... a part of what builds your foundation... It is something inside of you, that you conjure up yourself. Some sort of power, strength, calmness, ah, confidence, security, sense of ‘Nothing is going to happen to me. I’m going to be all right.’ ... For me, it’s nature. I go to the beach and I love being around the water. I love looking at beautiful scenery. I love smelling the grass. I love smelling the air. It gives me a sense of ... there’s just so much more, you know, there has to be, because the beauty and the power of nature is just so intense.”

Dale was raised in the Anglican church, but he also learned from his father – who had learned from his grandfather, a fisherman – tremendous reverence for nature: “He figured that ‘God’s work is out here. I’m in it. I’m good.’” The more Dale rejected organized religion, the more important his spiritual connection to nature became to him: “I still felt it was really important that I had, just a respect for something outside myself.” Time spent in wilderness, close to natural elements, helps him cut through distractions:

“It’s not centering so much as it is just getting rid of; it’s more like letting go of everything. I think for me, it’s more about going to that place and remembering what’s really important. The schedules, the computers, the documents, the thesis, the papers I have to write, those are of temporary importance.”

Paulina echoed this, saying that connection with the stars, moon and water also humble her: “I think it keeps me on track, like, whenever I get too caught up in mundane life.”

Both Daniel and Peter had left highly conservative Christian churches in their 40s, leaving them with huge voids in their lives. Both found spiritual solace in nature.

“I don’t call myself a Christian anymore. I call myself more of a spiritual person. Because I don’t go to church. I don’t find solace in the church. I don’t find that I can worship there. I find I worship in the world around me, like outside and in nature.”
(Daniel)

“There’s a God, but I see it in so many different things. Just sitting on a chair and letting the sun shine on my face, that feeling, such a spiritual experience, nature, water especially, the ocean. I think I’m as close to God as anywhere on earth just sitting on a rock and hearing the water.” (Peter)

Saul has a very particular relationship to spiritual connection with nature. Unlike organized faith traditions, when Saul communes with nature, his transgender identity never arises, never complicates things or raises people’s prejudices. Gender becomes irrelevant: “When I go into nature, I don’t have to deal with it [gender]. Right? Like, it’s not like the plants and animals judge me, gender me. I can go there and connect and not have to worry about like, negative transphobic, you know, infiltrations.” The importance of safety is evident.

Finally, Marie is worth quoting at length, as she describes what her individual version of spirituality means. It is about nature, but it is also about human nature and connections.

“I think you can be spiritual in the woods. And I think those are the places where I feel spiritual, in nature. And you know, when you have a powerful connection with somebody, when you have those moving moments, those things I think are spiritual.

That's what feels spiritual for me. And I do believe that there's some Something that connects all people. And I don't know what that is, but I do believe there's something bigger than me, than society, that unites us all. And that, I think, is spiritual. I think in the (some might say the mundane things, but they're not), like, when people are kind and giving and generous and when they take risks for others—those, I think, are spiritual things.... I find myself sometimes, in awe of the world and people in the world. And I am moved by those things. And I find a spiritual connection there. And I don't feel like I need to go to that building to find that.”

Fully accepting one's LGBTQ self (including sexuality) is spiritual

For several participants living fully as themselves, integrating their LGBTQ self in all aspects of their lives was itself a spiritual journey or spiritual experience. Both Cathy and Sarah spoke of this as living “authentically.” As Clare said, “To name that which you are, on every level, including your sexuality, and most profoundly your sexuality, I think it's an absolute, absolute joy when you're able to do that.” Doris described how living as her “authentic self,” coming out publicly as lesbian, is about the heart and soul, the Divine.

“When there's something that resonates, and resonates deeply,... it's like an instant text message from the divine that there's something here that is of the holy. There's a deep knowing within me, that I trust, which I didn't trust before. I'm sure it has something to do with this experience around the consciousness of my lesbianism. And the moving, and acting on that reality. It's when the Divine within is stirred, in a way that touches the heart, and then manifests in our living. The part of my being that was dormant, or repressed, for forty years, that part of my being was stirred. And is it entwined with what I understand as my soul? I think it is.”

She went on to say that living fully as oneself means becoming all of who one was meant to be: “That is how I understand as creatures, we are to become, in the best sense of possibilities, who we were created to become. To be and to continue becoming who we are created to be and becoming, ... to be fully who we are.”

About 30 years her junior, Benjamin articulated thoughts similar to Doris. In coming to terms with his identity as a transguy, Benjamin felt growing spiritual connection with those he considered his non-biological queer ancestors, his predecessors. He sees queerness itself as part of his spiritual practice: “Maybe my queerness is um, is a spiritual practice, because I'm creating how I am. And queerness to me is more than— It's not about who I am having sex with, but what kind of energy, yeah, what kind of energy I reproduce, move.” There is something about intentional living, about attending to energies in the world and in interconnections that is of the spiritual realm for Benjamin. Aron agreed, and extended this to queer political activism. Having hit bottom at one point, and discovered the value of being able to “tap into something deeper” to keep going anyway, Aron believes that faith in the potential for change is essential. This has made political activism into a form of spiritual practice for Aron:

“Having a faith that things will keep going or having a faith that conditions can change or having faith that I can survive and thrive, you know? It's like, you gotta hold that fire. ... I think some of that too has translated into my political beliefs, in terms of thinking about changing the world and having faith that I can change and that we can change and that our world can change. It's the same sort of spiritual faith that keeps me going, is like, knowing that there's something that's connecting

us, and can move us forward and not sort of feeling resigned to our present world and material conditions.”

A few participants extended their notion of the spiritual to include sexuality itself. Beth said she had always seen spirituality and sexuality as intertwined, often confusing the two: “I think my whole life I’ve mixed up sexuality and spirituality. Like, I would fall in love with my best friend, because we had a spiritual connection.” Cameron experiences sex itself as utterly spiritual. With her partner of 24 years she is totally present, connecting with all of her senses to the Divine in her partner. She and her partner find BDSM and exploration of sexual kinks heighten the sensory connections, the trust, and the intimacy, requiring them both to be totally in the body, yet transcending the body. Such sexual practices, she emphasized, take “relationship skills. If you’re going to be playing with heavy energies of the body, and the Divine, then be aware that you’re dealing with human beings, including yourself.” Cameron described sex as, “Souls entwining, mystical... for me, sexuality and spirituality are all just one thing.”

Sam used similar language to describe sexuality. He had been relatively repressed sexually after a difficult Catholic upbringing, and finally began to overcome this with the partner he calls the love of his life, and with whom he shared a deep spiritual bond:

“I saw the expression of sex, or making love between us, as a spiritual practice in itself. And that’s something that I did not ever have an understanding of within the Catholic Christian tradition that I was raised in. Sex was essentially viewed as a necessary evil. And I was quite happy (laugh) to let go of that idea. And instead view erotic play with my partner as a way of touching the Divine.... it’s a concept that fit very well with a more pagan framework as well. To see sexuality as Divine, to see sexuality as spiritual. Not as something dirty, to be ashamed of, to be hidden. ... not being ashamed of what I did in bed.”

The place of spirituality in LGBTQ communities today

There was general agreement among most participants that spirituality has individual benefits and is good for a community, particularly for communities that face adversity. A few people perceived their LGBTQ community as reasonably welcoming of both spirituality and religion, though they often said that they personally did not really talk much about spirituality with others. The overwhelming perception, however, was that spirituality is not really welcome in our communities.

Some argued that organized religion is rejected in LGBTQ communities, but spirituality is welcomed, especially forms based on “power-from-within.” As Beth said,

“There’s probably a lot of people in the queer community that have been hurt by religion and their church and people that call themselves religious. So, there might be some aversion to religion. So, it seems like people in the queer community tend to gravitate towards more alternative religions or spirituality rather than mainstream.”

Dayna, too, commented that while people in her LGBTQ circles were happy to adopt New Age spiritual paths they abhorred any mention of Christianity.

By far the dominant perception was that both spirituality and (especially) religion are widely rejected in LGBTQ communities. People described it as irreconcilable, stigmatized, challenging, unwelcome, and silent. One participant used the term “church phobia... an irrational rabid response” (Rick). Kyle said, “I see a very big disconnect within the queer community. I think that it’s still very much of an oddity [to be openly spiritual].” Cathy noted, “There’s a lot of mistrust. It hasn’t been a place where queers have been allowed or felt safe. So we’ve lost it, I think, a little bit.” While Ross made the point that there are open, supportive churches and congregations in the Halifax area, others like Dierdre thought there is too much “stigma and fear of being judged” for most people to risk talking about spirituality. Benjamin drew a distinction by race:

“In the white queer spaces that I’ve been participating in or visiting or knowing, spirituality was almost a taboo, in some way. And in the queers of colour spaces, there was a lot more wholeness in that regard, a space for that.”

Sam said, “I still feel like an outsider, for the spiritual path that I’ve come to.” And Doris remarked, “All of the women with whom I’m friends, the circle that I’m inside of, none of them are connected to religious community in any way shape or form. All of them have had bad experiences.”

Exclusion, marginalization, suppression

Many of the interviews were filled with a sense of loneliness, isolation, exclusion, marginalization, and even ostracism. We were struck repeatedly with how queer communities may be replicating the kind of exclusions so many of us have faced, shutting out those who express themselves as spiritual, especially if that spiritual focus is Christian. As Jennifer joked, “They say ‘Don’t tell your Christian friends you’re queer and don’t tell your queer friends you’re a Christian.’ (laugh) Because people see those two worlds as separate.”

Quincy thought LGBTQ communities are particularly intolerant of Christian queers:

“Being in [a Christian] church, sometimes it was tough explaining that I was queer. And being in the queer community, sometimes it was tough explaining my affiliation to a denomination. And I think we need to be more open about that, in the queer community. And support each other in finding ourselves in our spiritual homes.”

Lee-Anne drew a moving parallel between being closeted as a bisexual woman, then as an LGBTQ person interested in Catholicism.

“Sometimes it just feels like there is no— You have to be one or the other... Especially when I was a little younger, sometimes it was like, ‘Maybe I should keep this quiet, because this isn’t really talked about.’ You know? But, not realizing how much of a disservice it was doing to myself, because it was going from suppressing my sexuality to suppressing my spirituality.”

The hints of self-silencing and re-closeting here are profoundly sad.

Those who identified as spiritual often felt excluded and marginalized within LGBTQ spaces, and this only intensified for those who identified with specific faith traditions. Those who were clergy felt uniformly marginalized, even ostracized. One participant wanted to be in a relationship, but found it nearly impossible to meet others who were not scared off by the ‘clergy’ label: “I know I come with this big yellow warning label ‘Clergy’. (laugh) You know? I

might as well be radioactive.” Another noted that the marginalization within LGBTQ communities echoed an ongoing marginalization within the faith tradition, even in relatively affirming churches:

“I’m aware of the assumptions that are being made, ...assumptions about who I am that may fit and may not fit. So, there’s that sense of oddness that I feel... but also, I’ve always been sort of on the margin of the church. ... With the diverse community that I find myself in now, of women who are lesbian, there are moments when I feel odd, and I’m conscious that there are times I try to probably put something in that indicates ‘I’m not so odd after all.’”

This sense of estrangement from community was echoed by another clergy member:

“I think within myself I’m all right. It’s finding my place in the community, in both contexts. Finding a place for myself as a queer within the Christian community, and a place for myself as Christian within the queer community. There is room for both. But I haven’t found it yet, at least not entirely.”

How do we move to a better place as a community?

We don’t have answers to this yet, but we hope to continue the discussion. It is clear that religions have caused and continue to cause immense pain and suffering in LGBTQ lives. The losses have been, and continue to be, enormous. Yet many people continue to long for something, yearn for something. People spoke of a void, an emptiness, a search for greater meaning. Even those who have found spiritual solace, most often through individualized spiritual beliefs and practices, often feel a need to hide that in LGBTQ circles. There is clearly a deep and pervasive tension concerning spirituality in LGBTQ communities. Just as LGBTQ selves were often unwelcome in religious communities, so spiritual selves are often unwelcome in LGBTQ communities. The exclusion and isolation within our own communities leaves us moved and disheartened. We leave the final words to one of the study participants, Clare:

“I think spirituality, if we can somehow have more conversations around spirituality and liberate it from our experience of religion, I think it really provides a lot of potential for people to find not just comfort, but a stronger sense of themselves and therefore, a stronger sense of ourselves as a community too.”