

A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF  
THE EXPERIENTIAL METHOD

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## A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE EXPERIENTIAL METHOD

### **What is the Experiential Method?**

1. It is a research methodology designed to examine experiences, phenomena and situations from a qualitative perspective.
2. One of the major critiques of qualitative research is that the projects are all over the place (meaning that the research methodologies used lack the ability to focus on the specific relevant aspects of the topic).
3. The Experiential Method is a way to maintain a focal point of interest in qualitative research without wandering aimlessly into areas that are not related to the topic.
4. It is especially helpful and effective when attempting to investigate topics that do not easily lend themselves to quantitative approaches (when one is not trying to measure differences or to validate hypotheses or to establish rates or regulate behaviors).
5. The Experiential Method is a structured methodology not a loosely knit series of interviews.
6. Research findings emerge directly from what has been shared by and discussed with participants (clarified, refined and verified for accuracy) and then put into a wider, wholistic framework and put into dialogue with existing theory/research.

### **Description of Application**

1. Right and Wrong: Only one main problem: Imposing your own interpretation on what is being shared by participants rather than listening and hearing what participants are sharing.

### **Applying the Experiential Method**

Select a Topic

Write the Researcher's Presuppositions

Developing a Research Statement

Select Participants (P)

Biographical Outline of P#1 (presentation in write up)

Written Description of P#1

Biographical Outline of P#2 (presentation in write up)

Written Description of P#2 (this example is using only two participants)

Identification of Experiential Expressions (EE's)

Questions to Guide the Dialogue for P#1

Questions to Guide the Dialogue for P#2

Interview #1 with P#1 (transcription is included in Appendices)

Interview #1 with P#2 (transcription is included in Appendices)

Review EE's to ensure applicability for each Participant and revise as needed

Emerging Themes (list EE's for P#1 and P#2 beneath a common set of themes)

Listing of Themes

Thematic Amplification (include selected EE's and interview excerpts)

Reflective Synthesis (include a few select EE's and/or interview excerpts, dialogue with existing theory found in earlier Literature Review)

Postscript (include reflection on researcher's presuppositions and suggestions for future research)

References

Appendices (transcription of interviews)

### **Select a Topic**

1. For the small project select a topic that is something everyone has experienced.
2. Select a topic of interest to you (something you would like to know more about).
3. For larger research projects you should select a topic that is:
  - Relevant to the field of interest
  - Timely (item of contemporary interest)

- Helpful in terms of one's own professional advancement
- Is of personal interest (because you will be dedicating a lot of time and energy to it and if you are interested in it and like it, you will find it is easier to complete and will be done more quickly)

### **Write the Researcher's Presuppositions**

1. Regardless of which topic you select to research, you already know something about it. You may believe you know a lot about it (or little), you may feel that you understand much about it (or little) and you may already have had some experience with it (or perhaps not). Either way, you do have thoughts, feelings, attitudes and beliefs about something that is already known and to some extent, familiar.
2. These are called one's "presuppositions."
3. Before beginning any part of your research, find 30 minutes in a relaxed, quiet setting to sit down and write out everything you already think you know and understand about your topic. Include as much detail as possible and also include what you anticipate that the findings of your study will reveal.
4. The researcher's presuppositions are an extremely important aspect of your study because they present any of your own biases right up front. They will be placed at the beginning of your study so that anyone who reads it will know what your own biases and/or beliefs were at the time you conducted the work.

This also helps you as researcher, be aware of your own thoughts and preferences while conducting the study.

### **Developing a Researcher's Statement**

1. Composing the research statement (to which participants will spontaneously write responses for about 30-45 minutes) is extremely important, because it is your initial access point to the topic and will elicit information that will serve as the foundation for the entire study.
2. The research statement and the later questions to guide the dialogue are aspects that center the focus of the study on what you want to research. Examples of research statements:

Please describe one of your most humorous experiences.

Please describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable.

Please describe your experience of being creative as a spiritual practice.

Please describe your experience of inspiration in work and life.

### **Select Participants**

1. Mini-project, brief description.
2. Depending on what you have already been told, for a mini project you may want to select 2-3 participants.
3. Select participants who are readily accessible to you who can find the time to provide you with written or verbal descriptions.

### **Collecting Verbal or Written Descriptions**

1. Write out your research statement on a blank piece of paper. Give it to participants (on individual basis) and ask them to write spontaneously for 30-45 minutes in response to your statement.
2. Collect the written statements and begin the review.

### **Experiential Expressions**

#### **Questions to Guide the Dialogue**

1. After becoming familiar with the written descriptions you will find that there are points that need clarification, elaboration and more detail.
2. You will also find points in the description which point to more implicit information, items which seem important in marking a significant aspect of the topic of study or which if elaborated will yield a clearer and deeper understanding.
3. Jot these items down as questions to guide your interview. (mark the copy on the written description for easy reference).
4. Some questions should be broad in scope, others more specific. Asking participants to “tell me more about...” is a way to solicit more information without imposing on the other.

This is not the “Oprah” or “Donahue” type interview (not sensationalistic). But a learning experience. Leave things open ended, bring it back into focus by returning to the questions to guide the dialogue.

5. Develop your list of items to guide your dialogue with your participants.
6. Take the written description, your list of questions, tape recorder (and extra tape) with you to the interview.

### **Conducting Interviews**

1. For a mini-project do a 20 minute interview for each participant.
2. For other research projects these are an extremely important aspect of the study.
3. Arrange for 1-2 hour interview (there will be follow up interviews).
4. Tape (to be transcribed).
  - Familiarity with recorder
  - Inform participants that their interviews will be recorded
  - No set # of interviews (depends on how much is learned)
  - Quiet, comfortable setting at participants' convenience
5. Non-obtrusive.
6. The researcher should freely enter into dialogue with participant but should the interview begin to wander, the researcher brings it back into focus on the topic by returning to the questions to guide the dialogue.
7. Remain flexible to explore items which come up during the discussion to follow any content which seems essential to the study; again keep things open ended so the participant is not trying to second guess what you want to hear.

### **Experiential Expressions**

#### **See Appendix A for in-depth elucidation**

1. We all learn to recognize preferred styles of expression in other people—both in writing in speech and even in the professional writing styles of writers.
  - For example, people that work closely with other people—become acquainted with the styles of their co-workers—to the point that they can identify them
  - By the end of the year, most teachers can pick out a written piece of work by a student just by reading it (without having to see the name of the person). If you receive a letter from a friend, you know who it is by having read it and can truly picture it in our mind's eye
  - How do we do that?

What makes a style unique and identifiable? How do you learn to identify another person's "style?"

- Think about that for a while—identifying Experiential Expressions is much the same. It is learning to identify a style (although you may not know the participant at all—the time you spend with it, reading it, reflecting upon it and what the person is trying to convey and noticing “who” that person is, how it fits into that person’s)
  - This methodology is based on how human beings organize information, come to understanding and to arrive at “what something means”
2. Beginning with a description of an experience provides the researcher (and eventually any reader) with an initial “glimpse” of not only the phenomenon being investigated (the “what”) but specific information about the person(s) from whom the information will be gathered (the “who”).
    - When we speak or write, we reveal something about ourselves
  3. Experiential Expressions are the ground of the study. They are a “jumping off” point that provide a way to:
    - Gain an initial access to personal meaning (style, attitude, belief and personal value system)
    - Provide ground for developing questions to gather more information and correct, clarify or enhance what has already been learned
  4. When a person describes a personal experience it is always described in a situation—a context. Therefore you will receive information about the circumstances that led to the experience, how the person lived through it, the way it ended and how it “remains with them.”
  5. Beginning the review process—Work on one description at a time.
    - Read the description all the way through, start to finish. Get the “big picture”
    - Re-read it again several times, more slowly...more thoroughly and not only look at what has been said but begin to identify what is important to the person who wrote it and how it has been lived and expressed
    - Begin to ask yourself, what is it about this experience that is meaningful for this person and how is this experience lived by this person, what does it say about who this person is?

- Make several copies of the description to use to identify EE's description slowly and begin to underline what seems important to the meaning of the experience as it has been shared by the participant(s)
- Re-read it again, see if your EE's make sense. If not, change them. Perhaps some parts seem to "fit together" to make a single thought or short sequence or complete a thought. That is fine to do. They can be "linked"
- As you will see when you do this, sometimes it seems as if an entire paragraph is important. Go ahead and underline it. As you progress through the identification process, it begins to "jell" right before your eyes
- Each time you go through the description, you see different things. So do not be afraid to change your underlining (typically they change until you are finally "satisfied" and until they are shared with participants who validate/or suggest changes)
- Once EE'S are identified, number them sequentially. For example:
 

Participant #1 EE#1	=	P#1EE1
Participant #1 EE#2	=	P#1EE2
Participant #2 EE#1	=	P#2EE1
Participant #3 EE#1	=	P#3EE1
- EE's are always italicized...if you have lifted a phrase or part of the sentence, put an ellipsis (...) in front and at the end (if needed). If you "splice" phrases together, enter an ellipsis between the two phrases to connect them
- Once you have identified your EE's and listed them, you can share them with the participant(s)
- You are now ready to develop your questions for the first interview (using information gained from the description)

### **Arriving at Themes**

1. Once the EE's for each participant have been numbered sequentially, you are ready to identify themes.
2. Group EE's together into batches which seem to "go together" in meaning—they refer to the same thing, illustrate a common core of meaning, refer to the same aspect of the experience as other participants have mentioned. Begin to notice that particular events, feelings, values and responses re-occur throughout the all of the descriptions.

3. Bear in mind while going through this is that you have several participants who have described the same experience. Although you have as many different contexts (situations) within which that experience arose, you will find points of similarity—and points that distinguish them from each other.

Now is the time to look for the commonalities.

There are several ways to do this:

- If you are using a computer do a “cut and paste”
  - You may want to list the EE’s (always keeping them numbered, that is P#1EE1) Copy your lists
  - Separate EE’s (cut them into single units)
  - Begin to arrange EE’s by likeness (which ones refer strictly to the situation—tell where participants were, what they were doing—describes context)
  - Arrange EE’s together that speak about what one felt like, what something meant for the participants, what they were thinking—that is—EE’s that refer to the content, the thematic content
  - Not every EE will “fit” in the pattern which begins to emerge—but include as many as possible
  - Once they are organized—begin to look for what they say about the experience, something that is an “overarching” umbrella under which these particular EE’s would “fit”
  - Try out a theme—mull it over, think about it. You may decide to modify it to better express what has been seen
4. Remember while doing this that you are looking for very broad themes, ones that reflect a significant part of the whole.
  5. After themes are identified list EE’s under the most appropriate theme (some may fit more than one theme).

### **Thematic Amplification**

**See Appendix B for in-depth elucidation**

Thematic amplification is a way to bring together all of the information that has been gathered. Writing this section is done as follows:

1. Begin with first theme:
  - Review the original written/verbal description(s)
  - Look at the EE's
  - Re-read the questions asked during the interview-discussion
  - Review the interview(s)
  - Review the grouping of EE's
2. Begin to bring the information together into a narrative to illustrate how the theme emerged (from the EE's which are cited to tie the narrative down with EE's). This allows readers to see how the researcher came to the theme and to understand more fully what the phenomenon means.
3. As you begin to tie the information together which relates specifically to a particular theme, you may also want to refer to how it relates to the other themes, how it assists in forming an overall pattern or picture.
4. As you work through the narrative, you will be pulling together bits and pieces from information provided by all participants. Turn to the interviews for information that comes from the dialogues. Information gained during the interviews provides a much broader scope and deeper, richer content.
5. Not only do you cite specific EE's to illustrate and demonstrate what you have said but you also pull specific excerpts from interview/discussions, statements that amplify what is initially seen in the EE's.
6. Repeat this procedure for each theme.
7. After you have written up the Thematic Amplification, you will have not only the structure of the study (the pattern, the picture, the schemata/image) but the fuller, richer, human experience—its meaning for human beings and how it is organized in consciousness.
8. Embedded within the Thematic Amplification are the values which guide the actions of your participants and reveal who they are as persons, as well as what was found and how it was given in expression.

### **Reflective Synthesis**

#### **See Appendix C for in-depth elucidation**

1. The Reflective Synthesis provides the findings of the study.

2. It conveys the essence of the phenomenon studied. It is not supposed to be the definition of a phenomenon. Rather it is inclusive write up of what has been found.
3. In preparation for writing the Reflective Synthesis the researcher again reviews all that has been done up to this point. Whereas the Thematic Amplification aims to include “more,” now the focus narrows to “zero in” on universal aspects while maintaining the particular as well. The Reflective Synthesis includes selected EE’s and a very few excerpts from interviews, ones which make what is being said especially clear and easily seen by other. These EE’s and/or excerpts will tie down the findings by illustrating concretely what has been learned.
4. The focus of the Reflective Synthesis, although somewhat of a contradiction in words here, becomes more “abstract” and is written in a way that ties the major aspects (thematic content) together into an overall pattern and picture of what has been revealed. This is the point at which the researcher discusses any “uniquities.”
5. The Reflective Synthesis includes:
  - The personal meanings which reveal the true “humanness” of the participants (what this experience means for human beings)
  - The structure of the phenomenon (what is)
  - The cultural and social values (which guide human action and the development of personal meaning and identity)

### **Postscript**

1. The postscript is added to provide a space for three main purposes:
  - To discuss the strengths/weaknesses of the study
  - To suggest projects for future research
  - For the researcher to reflect on the presuppositions of the study (what the researcher anticipated finding) and what was actually found

Basically, it is what you, as researcher, have learned from doing the study.

### **Appendix A**

#### **Experiential Expressions/Emergent Experiential Themes**

This Experiential Method gains access to the dynamics of self-meaning constitution. This is revealed in one’s expression and description of an experience, of a phenomenon.

The first Dynamic Movement is identifying Experiential Expressions. These expressions are personally significant and provide a nexus of meaning within a contextual matrix. Experiential Expressions provide access to the qualities of experience and display its meaning for a particular person. Each of these Experiential Expressions, itself to itself, is a nexus of meaning.

Spontaneously written or verbal experiential descriptions contain guiding leitmotifs of meaning that remain throughout as Experiential Expressions. They are a nexus of meaning that remain significant through time. Experiential Expressions stand out. From these leitmotifs of meaning, themes emerge and strengthen the significance of who and what one is. Experiential Expressions are existentially beyond now.

People express the meaning of experience within lived subjectivity and its impact upon self-understanding. First identifying Experiential Expressions offers an opening onto the primordial ground of personal meaning. The person's ongoing experience of immediate consciousness of self-in-action is recognizable and identifiable.

Experiential Expressions provide a ground for further amplification. This is a way to continue staying-with the meaning of the experience as it is, an immediate given, at the same time to intensify, dilate and expand that which is expressed through focused attention. This allows the researcher to remain open to possible meaning by staying-with the wholeness of experience rather than reducing meaning to data by use of analysis. Data-ism reduces experience to theoretical abstractions. This Experiential Method is a synthesis rather than an analysis.

Experiential Expressions illustrate the person's experience and meaning. They are short expressions or single sentences that convey qualitative dimensions of how one experiences a given situation. Experiential Expressions may include statements regarding feeling, belief and attitude.

Experiential Expressions reveal a developing pattern of meaning that is interwoven throughout the description. They display thematic content that reveals personal meaning. Experiential Expressions speak the way a person has taken up meaning through choice and action. Experiential Expressions display primordial meaning within a contextual matrix that is specific to the person. Meaning and value arise and can be seen within this contextual matrix. Staying-with the immediate given retains the meaning of the experience as it comes into expression.

Meaning is interwoven into the ongoing continuity of personal life. Experiential Expressions bring to the forefront founding, self-meaning constitution and the expression of that meaning in the wider social context. Experiential Expressions reveal thematic content. This thematic content emerges into a pattern of related meaning and displays a personal choice by a self-in-action.

Emergent Experiential Themes express prominent aspects of a given experience. This is a contextual matrix that comes from and remains consistent within experience.

Experiential Expressions may relate to one or another theme but are placed where thematic content is consonant with the mood, tone and gestural meaning of the theme. When gathered into affinitive groupings of meaning, Experiential Expressions reveal an image/scheme of the person and display universal aspects found in others' experiences of the same phenomenon.

### **Becoming Familiar-With the Experience**

After obtaining the spontaneously written or verbal experiential description the researcher reads it as if reading a story for the first time, from beginning to end, straight through. The researcher's stance is one of openness and receptivity, to let the significance of the experience described stand forth and to allow the meaning, for the subject, to be disclosed. After reflection upon this initial reading and how the description struck the researcher, it is then re-read more slowly a second and even third or fourth time. This re-reading opens up the description, meaning begins to stand out, as the researcher becomes familiar-with the expression and uniqueness of the subject's description. The guiding question of the researcher is: how and what does this phenomenon mean for this who, this person?

### **Identifying Experiential Expressions/Emergent Experiential Themes**

As the researcher reads and re-reads the description, there will be significant expressions that seem to call together meaning and to identify expressions of the subject. The significant aspects of the experience as consistent similarities will come forward to the researcher's notice. Experiential Expressions may include statements regarding feeling, belief and attitude. This may include short expressions or single sentences that identify the experience within the subject's description. These Experiential Expressions express positive, negative, discrepant or consonant meaning. They stand out as significant in the description. Within this contextual matrix Experiential Expressions display further continuity of experience. After underscoring Experiential Expressions in the description, the researcher, in turn, re-reads the description a number of times, reviewing those expressions which have already been identified, remaining open to ones which may become apparent as the researcher gains familiarity with the subject's expression.

Within this contextual matrix Experiential Expressions begin to reveal a relation to one another, a connection that is recognizable and identifiable. They begin to show how meaning is lived and what that meaning is for the subject. Themes emerge from the affinitive grouping of Experiential Expressions, these themes are written down and the Experiential Expressions are written beneath them. These Emergent Experiential Themes tend to coalesce and gather together in likeness of expression. This sustains the originality, spontaneity, liveliness and vitality of the initiating expression. In this way, the research is staying-with the ground from which meaning arises.

## Appendix B

### Thematic Amplification

Thematic Amplification, the second Dynamic Movement is an expansion of the nexus of meaning found in each of these Experiential Expressions. Amplifying themes means that the researcher brings into focused attention details that contribute to the self-meaning constitution in action and experience. Amplifying is a way to bring to the forefront meaning which is in experience and which is, at the same time, the ground for its possibility.

Thematic Amplification works somewhat like time-lapsed photography where slowing down time reveals that which cannot be seen in a single grasp. In microphotography, for example, a whole world can be seen within another. This shows how an increased intensity of attention by the researcher reveals what an experience is and means in relation to a self-in-action. The researcher begins with and continues staying-with the tonal qualities of meaning which continuously give access to the subjective/objective dimensions of personal self and meaning. Henri Bergson clarifies what this means when he says:

In fact, we apply the term subjective to what seems to be completely and adequately known, and the term objective to what is known in such a way that a constantly increasing number of new impressions could be substituted for the idea which we actually have of it.

The expansion of attention calls for an effort to focus upon the immediate given in the context of related meaning. This effort of attention provides the possibility for depth and clarity in understanding the becoming of who one is through personal choice and action.

The expansion of meaning is a staying-with, a continuity of movement, which begins with an immediate given. This Experiential Method is a way to disclose meaning as it is being constituted and given in expression. Spontaneous verbal or written experiential descriptions display the vital quality of a living, personal context. Within this context the researcher can find in action, an immediate consciousness of self.

This second Dynamic Movement amplifies meaning found to be significant and thematic. This movement is an intensification of those meanings described by Experiential Expressions. It is a staying-with rather than moving-away from the originality of the description. Amplification is a reflexive sound of an original personal presence of meaning. The qualitative aspects of the experience emerge and are retained in a continuous movement. This amplification is a movement toward becoming. It is an inclusive effort of attention that intensifies spontaneously given dimensions in an expressive flow of meaning revealed in the experiential description.

Pierre Thévenaz describes this effort of concentrated attention as an act of will. It is a way of becoming conscious of that which is present in action and bringing that action

into clearer and sharper focus. The amplification of themes both conserves while expanding thematic content as an image/scheme stands out as recognizable and identifiable as a particular person's expression.

Experiential Expressions are retained throughout the second Dynamic Movement of Thematic Amplification as a way of staying-with personal meaning. This Experiential Method allows the researcher to be present to Dynamic Movements in experience that reveal a self-in-action.

### **Experiential Description**

The following example comes from a description provided by a 20-year old student in a four-year college program. The researcher chooses the subject(s) by how and who is asked for a description. The subject(s) is asked to describe an experience for the researcher and to later discuss that description at some length. For this example, the subject's response comes in answer to the research statement: "Please describe an experience of being inspired." No discussion of the topic ensued prior to obtaining the description. The way the description is written is retained in this example as it expresses something in itself. The underscoring of Experiential Expressions is accomplished by the researcher in the description(s). The underscoring of the description is maintained when it is typed and appears in italics when printed.

#### **Example: An Experience of Being Inspired**

The person that I experienced being inspired with is the most precious to me. My whole life is based upon what she gave me. She gave me the strength and power to achieve my accomplishments. I still feel this strength inside of me which she left in me after her death. This wonderful, precious, costly, irreplaceable person is my grandmother.

I remember when I was a little girl about ten years old. I would always stay at my grandmother's house during the day while my mother taught school. One day I went to her house a little earlier than she expected. I went into her room and saw my grandmother putting on a wooden leg. I ran out of the room and began to cry. I was very upset at God and I thought to myself: "Why did God do this to my grandmother? She is one of the nicest, purest people and she respects Him and loves Him. Why did He punish my grandmother, of all people?" Later my grandmother came to me and said she carried her own cross in life, a wooden leg. She told me: "Nancy, don't ever deprive yourself of your love for God because of what has happened to me."

When I was in the third grade I was not doing well in school. The other children would laugh at me and call me names. I went and called on my grandmother about this. She told me that I would someday be able to laugh at those people that were laughing at me. That year I was held back in the third grade and the next year, going back to the same grade, I experienced the worst time of my life. Children would call me names and laugh at me, I cried so much and was hurt very deeply inside. I called on my grandmother and

she told me that I was going to make something of myself. She started to build up my self-confidence which was very weak at that time.

I went to her with my problems and questions about life and she helped me so I was able to make decisions. I could relate to her. Then one day I went to school and coming home on the bus the children began to laugh about my grandmother. When they laughed about me it did not hurt me as much as when they laughed about her. I told myself that from that day on I would not give anyone a chance to laugh at her again.

I was inspired by what my grandmother told me, that I would make something out of myself. From that I received self-confidence which let my aspiration to improve myself come forth. She told me someday I would go to college and make something of myself. We would sit together at night and by her telling me stories and I telling her stories we were able to accomplish a self-satisfaction through storytelling.

As the years went on my grandmother's condition got worse. She became blind and lost her other leg. This was due to sugar diabetes. I still kept my close relationship with her and found myself going to her house everyday. When I was thirteen years old my grandmother began to tell me what to expect as I got older. She gave me guidance about sex, drinking, drugs and other matters concerned with growing up. Although she told me what she thought about that she still gave me room to breathe, space.

As I grew older I was on the "chubby" side and had braces. I felt inferior to other children. My grandmother gave me confidence and strength to improve myself. So I went on in my daily activities with her guidance, strength and power, as inspiration which she gave me. When I was weak she gave me strength to pick myself up. When I was laughed at by others she gave me pride to turn the other cheek. Even when I was sure of myself she gave me self-confidence. We told stories that gave me self-satisfaction and most of all, she gave me inspiration.

When I was fifteen years old my grandmother was sick and taken to the hospital. My family and relatives were waiting for my grandmother to be wheeled out of the room. As she came out she called my name and said: "No matter what happens to me don't blame God for this. And most of all, remember how I taught you." Late that evening we received a telephone call. When I heard the telephone ring I looked at the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. I knew my grandmother died because she told me that when she died she wanted death to come in her sleep. Then a feeling hit me, the most terrible feeling, I felt like my world collapsed before me. I did not hear anything around me and it felt as if a part of me was removed. I felt dark and cold and empty, death had approached me.

The next day I slept over at my grandmother's house, in the middle of the night the trees began to hit the window and a cool breeze passed through the room. As I looked up a flash of light passed through and brushed the side of me. I did not scream or was not frightened because I knew this was the last time I would have contact with her.

I never thought I could carry on without her. But I found later that I could through her guidance and strength that I received. "I could make it" because inspiration remained. The next day my relatives were going through her possessions as if they were at a flea market. But I received the most precious gift of all, more costly than any tangible item, I received inspiration.

As the years went on and I went to high school I made good grades and was crowned queen. What my grandmother said came true. Now I just have to live out the rest of my life with her gift. I know through inspiration that I will make it. I can see what she was telling me when I was young, that she was carrying inspiration, for me and now I carry this inspiration in me to accomplish my tasks. I still carry her with me although her bodily image has left me.

### **Experiential Expressions**

#### Paragraph 1

EE1 My whole life is based upon what she gave me.

EE2 She gave me the strength and power to achieve my accomplishments.

EE3 wonderful, precious, costly, irreplaceable person.

#### Paragraph 2

EE4 "Nancy, don't ever deprive yourself of your love for God because of what has happened to me."

#### Paragraph 3

EE5 I went and called on my grandmother about this.

EE6 She started to build up my self-confidence which was very weak at that time.

#### Paragraph 4

EE7 I went to her with my problems and questions.

EE8 she helped me so I was able to make decisions.

#### Paragraph 5

EE9 I received self-confidence which let my aspiration to improve myself come forth.

#### Paragraph 6

EE10 She gave me guidance.

EE11 she still gave me room to breathe, space.

Paragraph 7

EE12 My grandmother gave me confidence and strength to improve myself.

EE13 she gave me inspiration.

Paragraph 8

EE14 it felt as if a part of me was removed.

Paragraph 9

EE15 As I looked up a flash of light passed through and brushed the side of me.

Paragraph 10

EE16 inspiration remained.

EE17 I received the most precious gift of all, more costly than any tangible item, I received inspiration.

Paragraph 11

EE18 What my grandmother said came true.

EE19 know through inspiration that I will make it.

EE20 she was carrying inspiration, for me and now I carry this inspiration in me to accomplish my tasks.

EE21 still carry her with me.

### **Affinitive Grouping of Experiential Expressions into Themes, Emergent Experiential Themes**

1. Openness and Readiness to Respond

EE5 I went and called on my grandmother about this.

EE7 I went to her with my problems and questions.

2. Gifts Given and Received

- EE2 She gave me the strength and power to achieve my accomplishments.
- EE8 she helped me so I was able to make decisions.
- EE9 I received self-confidence which let my aspiration to improve myself come forth.
- EE10 She gave me guidance.
- EE11 she still gave me room to breathe, space.
- EE12 My grandmother gave me confidence and strength to improve myself.
- EE13 she gave me inspiration.
- EE17 I received the most precious gift of all, more costly than any tangible item, I received inspiration.

### 3. Influence on Development

- EE1 My whole life is based upon what she gave me.
- EE6 She started to build up my self-confidence which was very weak at that time.
- EE19 I know through inspiration that I will make it.
- EE20 she was carrying inspiration, for me and now I carry this inspiration in me to accomplish my tasks.

### 4. Self-Other Meaning

- EE3 wonderful, precious, costly, irreplaceable person.
- EE4 “Nancy, don’t ever deprive yourself of your love for God because of what has happened to me.”
- EE14 it felt as if a part of me was removed.
- EE15 As I looked up a flash of light passed through and brushed the side of me.
- EE16 Inspiration remained.
- EE18 What my grandmother said came true.
- EE21 I still carry her with me.

### **Thematic Amplification**

Thematic Amplification as the second Dynamic Movement begins the expanding of meaning that is gathered around themes. These themes give expression to the continuity of developing meaning found throughout the experience. Amplifying these themes means utilizing the context within which the meaning is situated. This maintains the vitality of the experience.

The researcher re-turns to the original description. Since themes emerge from gathering meaning of Experiential Expressions, dilation of meaning through an effort of attention upon the theme will flow from the context in which the expression is situated. As the researcher intensifies the theme through amplification, clarity in the experiential boundaries emerges. The researcher looks at each theme in relation to the Experiential Expressions that it includes.

When doing qualitative research one remains open to the possibility of mis-interpreting intended meaning. The researcher considers themes in relation to the context and lets the experience itself be the guide in soliciting consistent meaning. Each Thematic Amplification contains within it Experiential Expressions. This is a way to discover how meanings coalesce. Thematic Amplification gives rise to the continuity of developing meaning in expression. Amplification of these themes lets the researcher come into contact with the dynamics of experience in ongoing meaning constitution. With amplification, unique aspects of the experience are included. The unique aspects help distinguish the phenomenon. This brings further clarity and focus to the work.

#### **Theme 1 - Openness and Readiness to Respond**

This theme emerges from two explicit statements by the subject that she went to her grandmother as a source of understanding and help. EE5, I went and called on my grandmother about this. This statement displays the consistent presence of the young girl's openness toward what she found through being with her grandmother. She found personal strength when she felt weak, she found pride to turn the other cheek when other children laughed at her. She found even deeper confidence when she felt sure of herself. The child's readiness to respond to the guidance and kindness offered by the grandmother, who was in turn guided by and showed living faith and trust in the religious dimensions of her personal approach to life, was the foundation for guidance offered to the granddaughter.

The subject, a growing child during the formative years, found something with the grandmother found nowhere else. This caring was the ground for an openness and willingness to share life's daily trials and tribulations. When the young girl experienced specific problems she would call on her grandmother about what was troubling her. EE7, I went to her with my problems and questions. The inspiring grandmother was open, available and ready to respond to the young girl who was struggling to find her own way in a world of experienced alienation. The aspects that emerge from this theme are openness, availability, readiness to respond and taking action upon what was found.

What was found proved to be true for the child through time. These aspects are revealed in the child's experience as well as the grandmother's, as each is reflected in the other's actions. The grandmother's experience is available in the stories and perceptions of the developing child. They are value-laden and identify what it is about the experience of being inspired that remains. What remains goes on through the granddaughter's actions now that the grandmother is no longer with her in the physical dimension. She remains open for and responsive to the grandmother's guiding influence, as something that has now been taken up as her own expression.

### **Theme 2 - Gifts Given and Received**

This theme shows the integral action of being inspired, gifts given and received. What was given was free and was the most precious and costly gift she could receive, more valuable than anything tangible. EE17, I received the most precious gift of all, more costly than any tangible item, I received inspiration.

This statement shows the gifts of self that are priceless. The pricelessness (free/invaluable) accompanies the scarcity as an aspect of the experience of being inspired. These gifts of self were found nowhere else with no other person. What is discovered, offered and received as one's own is nothing other than one's own possibilities. EE9, I received self-confidence which let my aspiration to improve myself come forth. It was not that the grandmother made the child become who she presently is but that the grandmother offered her options, freed her through the gift of self-confidence to let her own natural inclination toward becoming herself be mobilized. This was experienced as the strength and power she found to carry on in daily activities. EE2, She gave me the strength and power to achieve my accomplishments. What the young girl received from the inspiring grandmother was helpful in overcoming the unsatisfactory way of interacting, deep hurt and pain as a child which made her feel inferior.

As time went on into the teenage years the girl and the grandmother found their lives intertwined, each drawing strength and courage not only from one another but from the spiritual guidance and belief in God. This was not only verbalized by the grandmother but was lived by her in acceptance and willingness to bear the increasing physical deterioration in illness. Yet she was there for the granddaughter.

The young girl found herself living a future the grandmother "gave" her as a child when she told the granddaughter that someday she would go to college and make something of herself. These insights are intangible qualities and become available to her in action as something foundational to present day self-understanding. The intense experience of togetherness and exchange, leading to self-satisfaction gave way to intense experiences of loss when the grandmother died. This was followed by an experience of being unable to carry on alone.

As time wore on the young girl discovered that what had been offered through inspiration by her grandmother remained, EE8, she helped me so I was able to make decisions. What was received from the experience of being inspired was the ability to move on her

own power, to make her own decisions and to live them. This was accomplished through continuing to live the gifts given to her in her grandmother's guidance. EE10, She gave me guidance. The grandmother's guidance came to the growing child not as a set of rigid rules imposed upon her. Instead, this guidance came to her as encouragement, support, help in finding ways to stand up to the problems encountered in life. The grandmother's guidance was offered as something to be considered and was grounded in the faith which supported the grandmother's own stance toward the world. EE11, she still gave me room to breathe, space. What was received was not something imposed upon the granddaughter but something offered and chosen as her own after consideration.

This freed the girl to discover through experience the truth that resounds in her grandmother's words. What is central to this experience is a shift from being unable to carry on, to being able to achieve accomplishments. This shift in self-experience came to the growing child as self-confidence, strength, pride and self-satisfaction. It is this feeling for one's own possibilities that identifies the theme of gifts given and received. What was received enhanced the experience of one's own quality of being. EE12, My grandmother gave me confidence and strength to improve myself. EE13, she gave me inspiration.

### **Theme 3 - Influence on Development**

The impact of the inspiring experience upon the development of the girl can be seen most clearly through time. This caring was the ground for the girl in the mother's absence during the day, the grandmother came to be the person who listened to her and helped to find ways to meet her problems. It was not that the grandmother made the problems disappear but was there to offer words which helped the girl see herself as someone with a future. The close sharing of the girl's internal thoughts, wishes, dreams and hurts put the grandmother in the position of having something valuable to offer. What was offered was found through the years to be true. In reflection now the young woman understands what she discovered through being with her grandmother, EE1, My whole life is based upon what she gave me. As described earlier, the gifts of inspiration were the confidence to accomplish her own tasks, to find her own way, to provide strength in times of trouble, to provide solace in times of sorrow. EE6, She started to build up my self-confidence that was very weak at that time.

Now that the grandmother is gone from her physical accessibility, the meanings she helped establish in the young girl's life continue to support her, EE19, I know through inspiration that I will make it. The statements in this theme say that what was found with the grandmother will remain an influence upon her as she will continue to be integral to understanding her grandmother's life. The impact of what was shared *Inbetween* them has been significant in guiding the development of the granddaughter. The gift of inspiration was experienced as a shift in her self-understanding. EE20, she was carrying inspiration, for me and now I carry this inspiration in me to accomplish my tasks. The gift will continue to be in her personal expression. It was given to her by her grandmother and is now carried in her.

#### Theme 4 - Self-Other Meaning

This theme is expressed by statements that reflect how the experience of being inspired was perceived in terms of human values. What value the grandmother has taken on since her death helps support, guide and strengthen the inspired girl's ability to be herself confidently. This has been a long-time development found by her in reflection upon how she has lived the inspiring experience of being with her grandmother. EE3, wonderful, precious, costly, irreplaceable person, describes the impact and value of the grandmother's meaning for her. EE16, inspiration remained, displays what was given to her as what was shared *Inbetween* them for years and lives on in the granddaughter's daily actions. The values which guide these actions came from the grandmother's teaching and guidance, EE4, "Nancy, don't ever deprive yourself of your love for God because of what has happened to me."

It was the grandmother's way of facing her disabilities and death that helped display the authenticity of her words for the young girl. It was her way of being encouraged, to stand fast in the face of childhood pain at the hands and words of other children's cruelties which provide the experience of being strong enough to face her own life. It was what was received from the grandmother as a remaining influence in her life as something carried in her rather than for her by the grandmother. The grandmother's ability to accept her own physical handicaps and yet continue to love something higher than herself, provided for her granddaughter a living possibility. These were values that came as guidance, love, patience and understanding. The grandmother's inspiration came from telling her granddaughter that someday she would make something of herself. Through time she has come to find that the future the grandmother called for is what she has found herself living, EE18, What my grandmother said came true.

This meaning has come to the young girl through time. In reflection now, she can see herself as if through her grandmother's eyes, something she could not do at the time. When the grandmother died she felt she could not go on, EE14, it felt as if a part of me was removed. This describes meaning that continues beyond the physical, identifying the dynamic field of *Inbetweenness*. It was at this time in the young girl's life that her life passed before her eyes, as she experienced the emptiness of losing an essential aspect of her own existence. She was aware of her loss as being approached by death, EE15, As I looked up a flash of light passed through and brushed the side of me. Sleeping in her grandmother's bed that night she felt revisited by the light of her grandmother's spirit that in some unknown way consoled her in her grief. She realized that she would not have contact with her grandmother again.

This experience gives credibility to stories told by the grandmother. In some way the grandmother's spirit was available for the granddaughter. This came in the discovery that the inspiration once carried for her by her grandmother was now carried in her. Inspiration remains for her personally. What was carried by the grandmother is now in her own expression, EE21, I still carry her with me. In some ways the situation is reversed, now she carries the inspiration for her grandmother through her actions. The experience of being inspired remains as the young woman develops. Each time she is

able to make decisions, each time she remembers being elected high school queen, she is reminded and shown by experience that her grandmother's guidance was correct for her. This also means that she is living like her grandmother taught her. This was the strength of the last communication before the grandmother's death. The other's meaning was and remains essential to her own.

## **Reflective Synthesis**

### **Description of Reflective Synthesis**

The third Dynamic Movement in this Experiential Method is to write a statement that displays the dynamic structure: personal meaning and structure of the phenomenon. This should include some Experiential Expressions.

Preparing to write the Reflective Synthesis, the researcher re-reads what has been accomplished from the beginning. Re-turning to the original description re-grounds the developing aspects of one's understanding. As the researcher writes the Reflective Synthesis it brings these thematic aspects to the forefront. This statement retains the narrative. It presents thematic aspects of meaning in a way to generalize research findings, to distinguish one phenomenon from another and to apply findings to other living situations.

### **Application of Reflective Synthesis**

In this situation the inspiring experience arose during formative, developmental years of a young girl's life. The relationship established, nurtured and maintained throughout the grandmother's last years of life were foundational to the young woman's present day understanding of herself. This inspiring experience described situations where gifts of self were given to the young girl. She found these gifts through being with her grandmother. These gifts came to her through the grandmother's way of caring. She found inspiration available to her as personal strength, pride, self-confidence, being able to make her own decisions and being able to accomplish her own tasks. The shift from 'being unable to' to that of 'being able to' EE20, she was carrying inspiration, for me and now I carry this inspiration in me to accomplish my tasks, shows the dynamic structure of the experience of being inspired. The shift from 'being unable to' to that of 'being able to' displays breaking- through-boundaries (self-transcendence). The closeness of the relationship with the grandmother in times of duress, pain, deep hurt and suffering by the young child was the living context for being open to her grandmother's guidance. The grandmother gave the young girl inspiration in the present and toward the future.

These gifts included being able to attend college and making something of herself. They came true for her as if a promise had been fulfilled. This is authentic meaning. During her childhood her grandmother's openness and her way of helping gave the young girl the strength to face the problems she encountered in daily life. These ways of helping were based on values which guided the grandmother's own way of life. Her life was also filled with hardships but lived in an unyielding spirit toward them. These ways of helping gave

the developing girl the strength to improve herself. Although the young girl could not yet envision for herself the truth in the words offered by the grandmother about the future, the girl sought and listened to the grandmother's guidance on matters immediate and problematic.

EE1, My whole life is based upon what she gave me, displays the 'foundational meaning' of the grandmother's meaning to understanding the young girl. The meaning of the experience shows the inspiring experience to emerge as an influence upon her development and upon her 'being able to' improve herself. The experience of being inspired has influenced how the young woman understands herself and how others have come to see her just as her grandmother told her they would years ago. Daily life situations were the context for the experience of being inspired. The intimacy and meaning *Inbetween* the girl and her grandmother returned to her in the light and cool breeze which brushed her side during the middle of the night as she laid in her grandmother's bed the night after her death. From that time forward the young girl's life was different. She felt she could no longer go on, her world collapsed. But through time she found that she could make it as the inspiration of the grandmother continued on in her. What had been given to her remained in her. This shift in self-experience is something which is permanently there for her as something she now carries. EE9, I received self-confidence which let my aspiration to improve myself come forth, describes the 'inspiration/aspiration dialectic' present in the shift in meaning in the existential dimension. In this way, the self-other meaning lives on in the life of the granddaughter.

### Discussion

The Reflective Synthesis opens the research findings for discussion. For example: the inspired person will describe an inspiring experience as foundational to self-understanding. Regardless of how much time passes, these inspiring others (as it could be more than one person) continue to represent a time when personal meaning shifts. Whether the influence of the experience of being inspired lasts throughout a life-time is open to question. What one finds inspiring at one time may not necessarily be inspiring at another time. The other is necessary though as one cannot inspire oneself. Inspiration comes from beyond the self. It is a breathing in which comes from beyond the self.

The question now arises as to whether it is possible for each involved to be inspired? This is possible as it is possible to inspire the other. But what does the Reflective Synthesis display? It shows that the person who is inspired is open and ready for the experience. Universally we can say that the experience of being inspired is of 'foundational meaning.' It provides strength, courage and self-confidence as one's 'being able to.' This is an 'existential shift' from 'being unable to' to that of 'being able to' be that toward which one aspires. The experience of being inspired institutes ('inspiration lights up being'), shifts or re-affirms already-existing personal meaning values in existence. This can be displayed as an 'inspiration/aspiration dialectic.' Inspiration is the breathing in and aspiration is the breathing out, toward that which one aspires. The inspiring other lights up that which the inspired person is already-moving toward. Inspiration lights up values already-within the inspired person.

Gifts as inspiration are something valued, protected and treasured. They are also enduring and sustain self-confidence in one's own being. From the Reflective Synthesis we can see the transgenerational influence of the experience of being inspired as it shows itself as an advent of human meaning. Here reflection has gone hand in hand with development and maturation. Showing how these discoveries were grounded in the spiritual dimensions of life uncovered how values guide the inspired person's expressions and actions. We can also see that what has been given will continue on throughout the inspired person's expression.

This investigation of a single description of the experience of being inspired displays the intended direction of the inspired person. Yet it is a double possibility for inspiration. Put simply: 'you are the other.' It is a double possibility upon the single ground that arises spontaneously '*Inbetween*' (as each participates) those involved. This speaks to the possibility of co-constitution of personal meaning upon the ground of being-with the other.

If the question now arises as to the possibility of being inspired by God or the devil, we could say that God inspires and the devil possesses. When considering relationship God frees you for your ownmost possibilities and as soon as you enter into relation with the devil you are possessed, taking away your possibilities. It would be interesting to ask the question, "Please describe an experience of being inspired" to the Chinese, the Japanese and other cultures. The Chinese might speak of Confucius and the Japanese of Buddha.

## **Appendix C**

### **Reflective Synthesis**

Reflective Synthesis, is the third Dynamic Movement in this Experiential Method. From this emerges an understanding of who one is, the personal, in relation to the what of a phenomenon, the structure. Reflective Synthesis is a recuperating of:

- Personal meaning of one's own becoming
- The structure of the phenomenon
- The cultural and social values

How particularity, subjectivity into objectivity, what universality is achieved and revealed by a reflective synthesis. In this third Dynamic Movement the researcher returns to the two previous movements of experienced meaning. This movement includes some of the Experiential Expressions which sustain continuity and a continuous thread in meaning throughout. As the researcher becomes familiar with the phenomenon it becomes clear as to which Experiential Expressions will be retained in the Reflective Synthesis. The Reflective Synthesis does not provide a definition of the phenomenon, it resounds already-present-meaning. It is an attempt to transcend the opposition of personal meaning and structure as separate, it is a dynamic structure.

Through the continuity of the Three Dynamic Movements as Experiential Expressions/Emergent Experiential Themes, Thematic Amplification and Reflective Synthesis an enriching synthetic understanding is achieved. The wholeness of the initial experience is the ground for the Reflective Synthesis. This movement allows theoretical implications to come forth, clarifying the boundaries of interpretation. The reciprocal movements, the Three Dynamic Movements, in experience bring being into the clarity of existence.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The call for a new method in the humanities has revealed not only that a viable alternative to a scientific method or a reduction of experience to structural components is possible but issues a call of its own! The re-thinking of the foundations of the nature of the human being brings us back to experience. In this way we speak of experiential findings not of data (data-ism) or analysis.

The foregoing presentation has set forth the presuppositions of this approach, giving rise to a method. Approach is how you get there. Method is what you do after you get there. The three philosophical aspects of this approach: personalistic, intuitive, experience, are related to the Three Dynamic Movements in this method: Experiential Expressions, Thematic Amplification, Reflective Synthesis.

The work itself is an existential statement and an example of how self-meaning and understanding are constituted. Personal experience and the meaning found therein reveals a Dynamic Movement both in changes in self-understanding and how these are constituted. This is, says Thomas Langan, self-discovery. Each person is open to and turns toward values or turns away from that which is not.

As can be seen in the example presented, one first begins with the sustaining, Experiential Expressions. Experiential Expressions display self-understanding of a personal experience situated in a meaningful contextual matrix.

In the example for the subject, the meaning of being inspired is first and foremost understood as who one is, who she has become. The words to express this reveal the what, the structure, of the phenomenon, what being inspired means for human beings and who one is, the dynamics, constituted to self-understanding. She is in her words.

Thematic Amplification is a way to sound an original, personal presence of expressed meaning. It is a movement, expanding the expressive flow. In the example, four emergent experiential themes were amplified. Thematic Amplification discovers related meaning in the continuity of developing expression.

Reflective Synthesis is a recuperating of personal meaning, the structure of the phenomenon, the cultural and social contextual matrix. It is a uniting of already-present-meaning. It is a developing of thematic aspects of meaning and presents these experiential findings in a way that can be put into dialogue with existing theory.

In the example, the researcher presented an understanding of the phenomenon investigated, which begins with and continues with specific Experiential Expressions. This displays the universal within the particular and retains the dynamic structure. Experiential Expressions are a continuity, a continuous thread to display understanding.

This understanding for a philosophical idea would be the developing of presuppositions of the one wondering, thinking and searching for truth. As Martin Heidegger would say, it is the existential in the existentiell. This Experiential Method is an attempt to transcend the opposition of personal meaning and structure as separable, it is a dynamic structure. Put simply: dynamic structure is integral.

