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# The Journey from the Pew to the Cushion Women from Conservative Religions Practicing Mindfulness Meditation

Amy Avila Cherry

Lesley University, aacherry07@yahoo.com

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The Journey from the Pew to the Cushion  
Women from Conservative Religions Practicing Mindfulness Meditation

Amy Avila Cherry

A THESIS

Submitted to the M. A. Mindfulness Studies Program

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## Introduction

I looked in the mirror one morning and saw my mother in the weariness of my eyes. Through her eyes, I saw my grandmother looking back at me. It made me shudder from the exhaustion of trying. Trying and trying and more trying to be something that society and culture, not to mention religion, expected and still expect women to be. Generations of women who have had to try to be, instead of just being, showed up in my eyes and I wept with them. What follows on the pages to come is the story of how mindfulness meditation changed my *trying* into *being* and inspired this research, about other women, biased as it may be, who were raised in a very conservative religion and who also embraced a mindfulness meditation practice. Through this research, I theorized that religion doesn't help one "be" but a mindfulness meditation practice can help. This thesis doesn't represent women all over the world and may not qualify as transferable findings to all women. It is a beginning examination, and as such, a small window into what has happened in the lives of three women, who, after being in a culture of strict religious upbringing, embraced a mindfulness meditation practice and the discovery it led to in their lives. I interviewed these women and applied a phenomenology methodology of research.

In this paper I will first define Mindfulness Studies and/or Mindfulness Meditation. The definition is rooted in my own, personal experience. I particularly rely upon the way that I have experienced mindfulness through the culmination of the Mindfulness Studies masters degree program at Lesley University and my own searching for answers through practice. I focus on three primary components of this program. First is a history and philosophy of mindfulness as articulated by Jon Kabat-Zinn, as I believe,

much of the current Lesley University Mindfulness Studies program is based on his philosophies, research, and findings from scientific studies of MBSR (mindfulness based stress reduction.) My own path to mindfulness meditation is included in this first section. Second is a look into the emerging field of neuroscience and a specific scientific study of effects on the brain of long-term mindfulness meditators. And finally, this particular Mindfulness Studies program cannot really be completely understood without a fundamental knowledge of Buddhist history and studies, which I will outline and briefly discuss.

The next part of this thesis discusses the experience of women from conservative, religious background, and the implications and effects on them. My own experience of conservative religious living, as well as mindfulness meditation, is included. I am not a fourth research participant. I offer insights as a reflective component to the research and meaning making process. I will include highlights of the interviews of the three women. I will explain my research methodology using phenomenology to understand and make meaning from these women's experiences. My bias, stated, plainly is that a woman in a conservative religion cannot know oneself in the same, intimate way that a woman who practices mindfulness meditation can. This bias will continue to inform the thesis. After each introduction and a brief explanation of the history of each religion, I will include the partial interview of each woman.

Finally, the last part of this thesis will deal with the analysis of what I discovered in the interviews, research, and overall process. I will discuss what the similarities and differences were among the women, including what was surprising or affirming of my

theorized and biased assumptions. I will also include any newly emerging questions that extend the inquiry beyond the scope of this research project.

## Mindfulness Studies

### Jon Kabat-Zinn

By the time I was twenty-five years old I had three children. So many people have asked me how I found myself in that situation, tongue in cheek, of course. Sometimes I answered back, truthfully, "I don't know." Looking back I remember only a handful of intensely satisfying moments during that time period of my life. One of those is taking my two older children to pre-school and then coming home and sitting on the floor with my two year old. I was so tired and life seemed like a haze of chores and childcare and yet I remember playing the same facial identification games with him everyday. I remember his smile. He was so happy to tell me where his eyes and nose were. He was so happy to patty-cake the same rhyme every day. I remember feeling my sits bones on the floor. I didn't know that this was mindfulness. I was just too tired to do anything else. And yet, 20 years later, this is one of my fondest memories of those early years of parenting. I feel very much like Nadine Stair, an Eighty-five Year old from Louisville that Kabat-Zinn (2005) quoted as saying, "Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many year ahead of each day" (p. 3).

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program known as MBSR at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, Massachusetts. The program remains now what Kabat-Zinn originally intended, an eight-week program constructed from following the Buddhist traditions in Asia of mindfulness. His definition of mindfulness in its simplest form continues to be, "moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. xlix). It has

succeeded in becoming one of the most outstanding programs for stress, anxiety and pain reduction in New England if not all over the United States. I recently heard him speak at a workshop where he shared the surprise of many regarding the success of MBSR, especially coming from someone without credentials (A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lesley University, October 18, 2015). I wondered what Jon Kabat-Zinn's credentials were and where he started on his path towards his achievement in the field of mindfulness stress relief.

While at MIT as a molecular biology student, Jon Kabat-Zinn picked up a flyer on his way across campus regarding a Zen teacher who was speaking on how to study meditation. The Zen master's name was Philip Kapleau. The flyer read, "The Three Pillars of Zen." This was in 1966 and he had been feeling "rather alienated and out of sorts," due to the Vietnam War and other politically charged issues of the time (Kabat-Zinn, p. 491). Philip Kapleau had been a reporter for the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal and had spent many years practicing Zen in Japan. Jon Kabat-Zinn had no idea who Philip Kapleau was or what practicing Zen meant but due to his uncomfortable feelings and discontent, he picked up the flyer and went to the talk held in the late afternoon, seminar hour. He had no experience with meditation or any understanding of the dharma and remembers very little about this first exposure to it. But what he did remember was that few people showed up, about five or six out of an academic community of thousands, and that Kapleau had experienced relief from chronic stomach ulcers regardless of the fact that conditions where he practiced in Japan were dismal and primitive with no central heating or comfortable furnishings. Kabat-Zinn (2005) comments,



Whatever else Kapleau said, it was first time hearing somebody speak compellingly and from firsthand experience about meditation and about dharma. I remember feeling as I left the talk that I had stumbled onto something extremely important that couldn't have been more relevant to my life at the time, and to my sanity. So I started sitting on my own" (Kabat-Zinn, p. 492).

Later, Kabat-Zinn studied more of Kapleau work, studied with other Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Seung Sahn Hyon Gak, attended many retreats and workshops with communities such as Insight Meditation Society and eventually started teaching his own brand of meditation.

Many have called Jon Kabat-Zinn's work secular meditation. He vehemently opposes this labeling of his process or style because it limits its sacred nature and reduces it due to dualistic or black and white thinking of others. Instead he more readily accepts the term "mainstream mindfulness" which is less biased and more inclusive of his hopes for the success of its relevance in the everyday fields and lives of all people (A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lesley University, October 18, 2015). However, in my opinion, he brilliantly converged the Eastern philosophies of meditation with the Western style of medicine, thought, and perception by largely downplaying Buddhist philosophies in his immediate teachings and using a scientific context to further study the effects of mindfulness on the brain. He has obtained thirty-five plus years of quantitative data as proof and validity of the practice of mindfulness. These studies show that the gray matter of the frontal-cortex of the brain, with the practice of mediation, increases and is maintained, even with age. As his career continued, he also founded the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and

Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (Cochran, 2004). His work is renowned in medical communities and is starting to take hold in schools, businesses, governmental agencies, such as the police department and prisons, and is far reaching even though in the past many have been resistant to any form of Eastern meditation, philosophies or religions. Regardless, his work has been fundamental in spreading the knowledge of mindfulness meditation and also the acceptance of this work and the importance of it throughout mainstream and secular societies (Boyce, 2005).

### **Finding Mindfulness Studies**

In 2012, I approached an academic advisor at the Graduate School of Social Sciences at Lesley University in the hopes of pursuing a degree in Counseling Psychology. I had been exhausted by the first two courses I had taken in this field, knowing that it would, in the end, be too traditional and clinical for what I was interested in. However, I didn't know where to find myself within the study of social science. The main administrative adviser, Lisa Lombardi, suggested that I take the *Mindfulness Theory and Practice* course. I didn't even know what that was. I had never meditated a day in my life. I wouldn't have been open to it if I had known specifically what the course entailed. She assured me that it was a course that was highly regarded and that many students found it helpful as an elective in their pursuits within counseling. I reluctantly enrolled in the course.

Simultaneously, my life had taken a shocking turn, revealing painful truths and destroying the structure of my life that I had built for the first forty-three years. I had been raised and had fully participated in the Mormon Church during that time. But truths of my own sexual orientation were threatening what I considered to be the norm, as well

as being completely inconsistent with my religious upbringing. This ultimately culminated in the greatest upheaval of my life, leaving the Mormon Church and my marriage. I was unknowingly ripe for the unfolding mysteries of mindfulness meditation to enter into my very protected and rigid, conservatively religious life. However, forty-three years of fear-based religious training and bias is not instantly overcome. What brought me to an acceptance of learning mindfulness studies are the many years of scientific, neurological studies of the brain using fMRIs on those who have practiced mindfulness meditation for many years. Many traditional Eastern practitioners have little need for these studies knowing the results of mindfulness meditation from a deep internal knowledge of the practice itself. But when coming from a place of a conservative religious upbringing in the Western society I was raised, I needed this confirmation to make the practice a less fearful and threatening place to be, in order to start the experimentation of the mindfulness meditation practice itself. We studied some of the scientific studies currently available, which validate mindfulness meditation. The course I took entitled, *Mindfulness Practice and Theory*, began with learning about the foundation of the brain in a general way, reviewing the findings and results of many of cutting edge studies, and culminating with the practice of meditation itself.

### **Lazar Scientific Study**

As I have alluded to, in recent years, there have been many studies of the brain looking at the frontal cortex matter of those who have practiced mindfulness meditation. As a way to focus and simplify, I will only spotlight the work of Sara Lazar who is a neuroscientist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. She is one of the first neuroscientists to make claims using brain scans that mindfulness meditation

had neurological wellness affects for the health and well being of the brain and that positive changes occur in the brain from the simple act of meditation. She began her research after experiencing the affects of yoga, which she practiced for injuries that she had sustained from running the Boston Marathon (Schulte, 2015). She noticed that she also experienced a calmness and ability to handle difficult situations. She decided to do her first study on long-term meditators versus a control group. What she found was that meditators had “increased amount of gray matter in the insula and sensory regions, the auditory and sensory cortex” (Lazar, 2006). She also found increased gray matter in the frontal cortex of the brain. This represented the theory of more wholeness and wellness in mental and emotional ways because this part of the brain controls the working memory and executive decision-making (Farb, 2007). Although it is well documented in other scientific investigations of the brain that as we get older this pre-frontal cortex shrinks, long-term practitioners’ showed no such shrinkage or decrease of gray matter in brain scans. The study cited that, “...in this one region of the prefrontal cortex, 50-year-old meditators had the same amount of gray matter as 25-year-olds” (Lazar, 2006). The study also found that significant changes in the gray matter of the brain occurred when meditating for approximately 40 minutes daily for eight weeks. Although participants were supposed to practice consistently for 40 minutes daily, changes in the gray matter of the brain also occurred even when practice happened less, some reported only practicing for two days a week. The results of this study prompted many science oriented people to continue or start a mindfulness practice. Lazar states this about the results of her own practice, “I’ve been doing this for 20 years now, so it’s had a very profound influence on my life. It’s very grounding. It’s reduced stress. It helps me think more clearly. It’s great

for interpersonal interactions. I have more empathy and compassion for people” (Schulte, 2015).

### **Buddhist Studies**

Although Jon Kabat-Zinn tried to keep religious dogma out of his professional mindfulness pursuit and accomplishments, the insight meditation that he uses is rooted in Buddhist philosophies, theories, and traditions. The following is a review of a few of the fundamental beliefs that Kabat-Zinn writes about in many of his publications, both books and articles, and from which his practice derives its worth and value to him personally. It is important to write about this because the success of this MBSR eight-week program and its benefits to patients, who have come from all over the world to participate, comes from rich Buddhist origins.

There are variations of the traditional story of the Buddha. This is my interpretation of the many stories and versions I have read. Siddhartha Gautama lived in India sometime during 624 to 480 BC. He was a privileged young man coming from an elite clan whose father was a leader of their tribe. This left him also as a leader in the tribe, a prince of sorts. He married young, as tradition required, and led a secluded life until in his late twenties (Mitchell, 2014). The story goes that one day he left his compound and ventured out into the community and encountered four different experiences at various times regarding human frailty. The first was an old man, which taught him about aging. The second, disease, the third, death and finally a fourth experience of meeting a dedicated practitioner or ascetic who was dedicating his life to his religious pursuits. Overwhelmed by these experiences, he left his family to follow in the footsteps of the ascetic man he had met to try and solve the universal problem of the

suffering of human beings in the world. He studied and meditated for the next six years and gained devoted followers. After many years of practice, which included enduring pain, discomfort, and fasting almost to starvation, he accepted a bowl of rice from a young girl. Many of his followers considered this weakness and left him (Rothberg, 2006). However what he discovered from this was that harsh conditions did not equate to spiritual enlightenment and from then on he promoted balance instead of harshness on a path that limited extremism. That night, after he had eaten the rice, he sat under a Bodhi tree determined to meditate until all truths came to him. He meditated there for several days overcoming demons and temptation and after touching the ground, he asked the Earth to hold him and bear witness to his enlightenment. His mind was able to answer all the questions of suffering in that one enlightened moment and he became “he who is awake” or the Buddha. He spent the rest of his life teaching people about his experience and discoveries or what is known as the Dharma (Biography, 2016).

I have heard and read the answer that Jon Kabat-Zinn gives to those who ask him regarding his religion. He tells them that he is a scientist not a Buddhist. In a recent workshop at Lesley University he said, “Even the Buddha was not a Buddhist” (A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lesley, October 2015). He was interviewed by Oprah on Super Soul Sunday and when she asked him what he thinks happens after we die, he replied, “I don’t know. What I’m concerned with is what is happening right now” (Winfrey, April 12, 2015). This may be his bias of organized religion that he takes with him into his work and mindfulness training; however, he still lives by many of the teachings of the dharma of which I will reference just a few,

including, the four noble truths, the eight-fold path, and the middle way. I specify these in particular because of their importance in my own practice.

The first of the four noble truths is that all humans experience dissatisfaction or suffering called Dukkha. The second is that the origin of this dissatisfaction or suffering comes from holding on or clinging to pleasurable things and also trying to avoid or have aversion to what is not pleasant or hard. The third noble truth is that suffering or dukkha can end and well-being can be restored by using the fourth noble way which is learning to use the eight-fold path (Hanh, 1999). Kabat-Zinn describes (2005) the difficult concept of dukkha in this way:

Buddhists have a remarkable and extremely useful word for the dis-ease stemming from being filled with desire from being fastened to a dying animal, and not knowing what we are. They call it dukkha, a Pali term in language spoken by the Buddha, that is difficult to capture in one English word, but which is rendered variously by translators and scholars as suffering, anguish, stress, malaise, dis-ease, or unsatisfactoriness (p. 127).

Kabat-Zinn (2005) analyzes the way the dharma has been cultivated and adapted in his usual scientific way to how we now view it by writing this about the Four Noble Truths:

The dharma was originally articulated by the Buddha in what he called the Four Noble Truths. It was elaborated on throughout his lifetime of teaching, and passed down to this day in unbroken lineages and streams within various Buddhist traditions. In some ways it is appropriate to characterize dharma as resembling scientific knowledge, ever growing, ever changing, yet with a core body of

methods, observations, and natural laws distilled from thousands of years of inner exploration through highly disciplined self-observation and self-inquiry, a careful and precise recording and mapping of experiences encountered in investigating the nature of the mind, and direct empirical testing and confirming of the results.

However, the lawfulness of the dharma is such that, in order for it to be dharma, it cannot be exclusively Buddhist, any more than the law of gravity is English because of Newton or Italian because of Galileo, or the laws of thermodynamics Austrian because of Boltzmann. The contributions of these and other scientists who discovered and described natural laws always transcend their particular cultures because they concern nature pure and simple, and nature is one seamless whole (p. 136).

Although he may be correct about it being able to scientifically stand the test of times through “empirical testing” or “natural laws” it also holds up in a personal way, being valuable in the ever-changing culture through generations of time. Each having their own new found difficulties but also relief from other more tedious issues from the previous generation, like laundry, for example. In this current generation of major technological advances which have enabled us the wonderful improvement of communication, continent to continent, we can also be susceptible to the effect of suffering when we are too involved in these technologies. There are still advantages and disadvantages which correspond to suffering and the relief of suffering by using the eight-fold path that the Buddha could have never imagined in 600 BC and yet those teachings are still effective in alleviating some of the suffering of not balancing our lives.



The fourth of the Four Noble Truths is a systematic approach that organizes one's efforts to conquer the effects of dukkha in our lives. These are as follows:

Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Diligence, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration (Hahn, 1999).

Each of these aspects of the eight-fold path have been investigated in many writings, talks, theories, discussions, workshops, and retreats. I will focus only on Right Mindfulness, as it is the path I looked at most in evaluating my own practice as well as the women I interviewed. Mindfulness has the power to dispel ignorance and take us to freedom or liberation of self. To me, it is the most powerful of the eight-fold path because with mindfulness you are engaged in the awareness in all of these different principles such as mindfulness of speech and concentration. It is a knowing of why you are speaking and taking action or reaction. You are there with that moment of frustration or elation, anger or love. You can feel and acknowledge the fear inside and use it to continue with right diligence and livelihood. Mindfulness promotes right action in the way it moves us to truth, not only mentally, but in knowing how we feel in our bodies as we process information and feelings. Thich Nhat Hanh stated that, "When Right Mindfulness is present, the Four Noble Truths and the seven other elements of the Eightfold Path are also present" (Kabat-Zinn, p. 138). Right Mindfulness leads in the rightful place of taking the entire eight-fold path and making it one as a unified whole.

The Middle Way is a concept that I find a place of solace in, in this world of numbered precepts and laws. Coming from and leaving a conservative, religious background can sometimes make one jaded in systems of rules that seem very similar to commandments. The middle way was always a very important part of the Buddha's

ideologies. He lost followers for his moderate ways of living and in seeking a spiritual plane. Even while in the most concerted efforts of seeking enlightenment, he was able to see that strict obedience and observance of physical discomforts brought no more enlightenment than a moderate way of being. The Buddha actually identified the eight-fold path as the middle way and said:

People in the world tend to believe in one of two views; the view of being and the view of non-being. That is because they are bound to wrong perception. It is because they are bound to wrong perception that they have ideas of being and non-being. Because they grasp these things they are caught in them. Because they are caught in grasping, they either take refuge in the idea of 'is' or of 'is not' (Hanh, 1998).

Thich Nhat Hanh has described this as attachment to an idea being 'right' or 'wrong.' We become attached to rigid thinking of how one should be. We become attached to the idea that what is right will always be right and what is wrong must always be wrong. Not only is living in extremes harmful and dukkha-producing, so is thinking this way. Organized, conservative religions sometimes use an all or nothing approach in thinking. This caused a fear-induced reaction in me to not look at the way things are or in other words, not be mindful of truth in the present moment, but instead caused me to think in a prescribed way. That I must adhere to the definition of one that has supposed authority over me to make righteous decisions. The Middle Way by using Right Mindfulness takes this back to an individual to find that pathway for herself instead of relying on this supposed authority. This is the way I interpreted these concepts and elements of Buddhism to find the middle way for myself in moment-to-moment observation.

## **The Practice of Mindfulness Meditation**

### **Women from Conservative Religions**

The principles of the dharma began a questioning in me of how a woman can bridge the gap of the philosophy and the teachings of the Buddha into a pragmatic way of living and of learning oneself. Coming from a deeply conservative religious background afforded me very little openness with regards to any other religious ideology or practice. However, life circumstances and the approach in this particular *Mindfulness Practice and Theory* class seemed to be the perfect storm to my entry into mindfulness meditation. My research evolved from the above questioning. What happens to a woman who has been ingrained in a rigid, conservative religious philosophy that required full participation, which may have resulted in the loss of her ability to healthfully and authentically focus internally, when she finds a mindfulness meditation practice and fully incorporates this system into her life.

### **What is Practice**

The first experience I had with any form of meditation was a body-scan practice. I remember distinctly lying on the floor and feeling myself connect deeply with the earth and the feelings of my body both externally and internally. It was an otherworldly feeling that I had never experienced before. I had to ask myself then what is practice. It is still an important and ongoing question. More than the scientific studies or academic knowledge of Buddhism or the study of other practitioners who have revolutionized freedom of mind and heart and who have inspired many, my experience of mindfulness meditation practice liberated my mind from the oppression of emotional or cultural holds that bind a woman coming from a conservative religious background including systematic sexism.

My life as I knew it was lost. The culture and religion of my childhood and past were gone. I sought for solace. This came from within using many varied practices of mindfulness meditation, the first of those being grounding myself into my body using breath or sound in a sitting meditation practice. However, soon my grief became so great that I was only able to practice Metta meditation, which is the practice of sending love and compassion to oneself first through personally chosen mantras, and then to others as is internally determined.

There were other practices that changed my life in the way I communicated with others, which was essential to one who is leaving a community of organized religion where many loved ones, including family, still remain. *Insight Dialogue*, another class taken while at Lesley University, is a practice that I formally used very little and yet its impact on my life is immeasurable. “(1) pause, (2) relax, (3) open, (4) trust emergence, (5) listen deeply, and (6) speak the truth,” are the steps included in Gregory Kramer’s book, *Insight Dialogue: The Interpersonal Path to Freedom that enabled me to deeply connect with myself using communicative meditation* (Kramer, 2007). As I sat across from someone and looked into his or her eyes practicing each of these steps, I ironically came to know myself better. I knew that in the past, my religion and culture controlled the truth of my communication with others. What was ‘supposed to be’ was at the forefront of conversation and even thought processes within. But when one uses ‘pause’ with breath from body and ‘relaxation’ causing ‘openness,’ knowing that what comes up is authentic, ‘deep listening’ occurs. This ‘deep listening’ profoundly changed the way I was to capture my reality. I listened with no agenda to another. I listened with my heart and feelings, leaving out logic and dogma. I listened symbolically with my eyes and heart

and soul. I listened to each person from a state of deep calm that reverberated throughout my body and transferred to me back to my own experience. Then as I again flowed through the 'steps' of Insight Dialogue and corresponding to my 'deep listening' of another, 'speak the truth,' as I had never discovered it in myself before, flowed through me. Kramer describes this step as:

'Speak the Truth' most obviously embodies the morality and mutuality of our practice; it also contributes to the element of wisdom. Speaking the truth in meditation also involves the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path that heighten practice into extraordinary: Right View, Effort, and Mindfulness. Virtue makes our social lives livable and lays the groundwork for happiness and ease. Morality inhibits detrimental actions such as harsh speech and helps create harmony. When harmony is established, peace can be cultivated. With Insight Dialogue we are committed to ethical speech, to truth and kindness (Kramer. p 164).

The words of truth that I spoke from that calm place contradicted years of conservative dogma that I had righteously held for much of the forty-three years of my life. Knowing myself became a blissfully but also excruciatingly painful exercise that I could no longer turn away from.

Many experiences for me of practice followed, including silent retreats, which further embodied and supported mindfulness as I developed it more in my life. As I continued to practice and also to engage in intellectual discussions of dharma, my pain eased into liberation and freedom from the confines of my childhood religious beliefs. It is true that I lost that religious community and some of my extended family through knowing myself and rejecting many dogmas of my past, but the freedom of that knowing

helped with the process of grieving those losses. As I mourned and processed my grief, I started to question the process of other women as they pursued mindfulness meditation, specifically women who were also raised in a conservative religious environment. What happened to the dogma and beliefs when mindfulness practices are instilled in their lives? What other experiences occur in their life? What happens to their organized religious practice? What do their life circumstances hold for future practice, both of religion and mindfulness meditation?

### **Phenomenology Methodology**

The following is an explanation of the methodology I used of phenomenology when researching the above questions using the interviews of three women and analyzing them. One interpretation of the definition of phenomenology is written below:

In its broadest sense, 'phenomenology' refers to a person's perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists externally to (outside of) that person. The focus of phenomenological inquiry is what people experience in regard to some phenomenon or other and how they interpret those experiences. A phenomenological research study is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation (or phenomenon). In other words, a phenomenological research study tries to answer the question '*What is it like to experience such and such?*' By looking at multiple perspectives of the same situation, a researcher can start to make some generalisations of what something is like as an experience from the 'insider's' perspective (Waters, 2006).

I am using phenomenology as a form of methodology to gain access to the human experience through the stories and experiences of three women who have been indoctrinated in a life-time of organized, conservative, religious dogma and have also had years of a mindfulness meditation practice. I am attempting to make meaning from the experiences of their lives within this research without making assumptions or conclusions of any solutions for existing theory or qualitative data of mindfulness meditation. Instead, I was open to experiencing with each of these three women their lives of indoctrination within the system of patriarchy due to cultural, religious conservatism and experiencing

the affects of mindfulness meditation, in not only their internal mind and but in their outward expression in life.

In an effort to keep this experience and research fully valid, I must state that I have an obvious bias towards organized conservative religious practices having negative affects of mindful truthfulness within one's psyche. This comes from my belief that organized religion has a history of sexism towards women due to a system of patriarchy which stems from the Judeo/Christian culture and theology. That being said, I was open to what experiences these women would have that could vary and differ from mine. I was curious to see if they had a similar bias or if their experience and belief system was vastly different from mine. I interviewed them from a place of having similar experience, knowing I carried a bias in me, but felt fully capable to embrace a new knowledge or meaning based on their individual backgrounds.



## Interviews

I will briefly introduce each of these women and their religious orientation in the order that I interviewed them following an edited and highlighted, dictated interview. The three women are first, Desiree Reese-Mottard, who was raised in a Fundamental Christian religion, known as Pentecostal, in Pennsylvania and Virginia. Secondly, Tatiana Scoll, from Kansas, who was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or more commonly referred to as Mormon, and thirdly, Stacey Klein, who continues to live in Brooklyn, New York where she was raised as a Modern Orthodox Jew.

### **Desiree Reese-Mottard – Pentecostal**

Thirty-nine year old Desiree Reese-Mottard, who now resides in Newton, Massachusetts, described her religious upbringing as Born-Again Christian or Pentecostal. She participated in two different congregations, Good Shepherd in Pennsylvania and Pentecostal in Virginia. She also performed with Ballet Magnificent, a conservative Christian-based professional dance repertory company.

For purposes of efficiency, I will give a short historical description of only the Pentecostal church instead of both religious organizations in Desiree's affiliation since its origin is well documented and researched with many religious historians. Traditional Pentecostal church historians believe that their faith exists and branches from ancient Christianity and but was restored in 1901 in part by Charles Fox Parham, a revivalist, who rejected the mainstream religions of the day such as Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptists. He believed that he was receiving an outpouring of the Holy Spirit toward an initiative to re-strengthen and perfect behaviors indicated in the Bible. He also believed calling upon, receiving, and in using the New Testament gifts such as healing and

prophecy. Although this revival spread, it remained largely regional, mainly in the Southern United States (Sack, 2000). According to Randall Stephens in a written essay, “The historiography of Pentecostalism is as multifaceted as the movement itself. The initial historical works on Pentecostalism came from within the movement. Pentecostal historians wrote within a ‘providential’ framework and focused on the role of God rather than human and natural causation” (Stephens, essay). These histories were apologetic and largely ahistorical. They depicted the Pentecostal revival as dropping from heaven like a sacred meteor (Sack, 2000).

Research on the history of the Pentecostal movement didn’t commence until after the 1970s with the rapid expansion of the religion and seminary-trained practitioners. Scholars had previously thought that:

...the conservative religion of Pentecostalism, like Fundamentalism, was regressive, crude, and not worthy of their interests. In the late 1960s, the historian William G. McLoughlin argued that Pentecostalism did not constitute a dynamic new force in American Religion. For McLoughlin, Pentecostalism, like other reactionary religious movements in American history, would fade away with time” (Stephens essay).

Some religious historians theorize that Pentecostalism came from the change in social status and economic security during the shift from the agrarian society to the industrial revolution. The guarantee of personal saving with adherence of biblical perfection and the immanent, apocalyptic return of Jesus helped to reassure and calm the anxiety of the times due to the upheaval of social status and economic security. Although the movement succeeded in part because of the acceptance of the marginalized, mainly the African

American people and the contribution of women, schism between leaders in the church affected the power of these minority groups and the segregation of the time period continued for Blacks:

...and not long after the revival ended the Pentecostals split along racial lines into two major denominations, one black, the Church of God in Christ, and one white, the Assemblies of God, with which the Tabernacle in Atlanta affiliated in the 1940's. The Pentecostal faith spread like fire, most rapidly in the deeply segregated South, but white Southerners were far from ready to embrace the multiracial..." ( Sack, 2000).

The dominance of men over women also continued. Church historian Susie Stanley uses the term "stained-glass ceiling" to describe barriers to women's leadership and advancement in Christian denominations with a long history of ordaining them. She states:

As the church grows more apostolic and more deeply spiritual, women preachers and workers abound in that church; as it grows more worldly and cold, the ministry of women is despised and gradually ceases altogether. It is of the nature of paganism to hate foreign people and to despise women, but the spirit of the gospel is exactly opposite... the rejection of women's ministerial leadership represents a worldly loss of focus upon the egalitarian spirit of the Christian gospel. Not surprisingly, the re-establishment of barriers to church leadership by most of the Holiness-Pentecostal groups on the basis of sex in the early decades of this century coincide with their increased complicity with prevailing mainstream practices of racial separation and segregation (Sanders, 1996).

The Pentecostal church was fraught with the interesting dynamic of lower income participants as a refuge from the elitism at the time but then also the eventual segregation of blacks and oppression of women as the church became more prominently middle-class. This religion is now known for its conservative and strict beliefs based on strong adherence to biblical scriptures taken largely out of historical context, as I have studied it, on an individual scriptural basis.

In the following interview, Desiree describes her experience in this conservative, religious environment:

A: So you started at a church called Good Shepherd?

D: Good Shepherd in Pennsylvania. It started there, cause my mom got saved. The whole...I got saved thing when I was born. So I grew up in the whole thing, the church. So then we moved to Virginia and we were in a Pentecostal Church which is very different, not different, but being in the South and being in a Pentecostal church is much more conservative. I mean I was so young but looking back I can see a big shift in how we lived out lives as a family when we went to the Pentecostal church. We were much more strict but we were also teenagers and our mom was a single mom. So, and I was the oldest so there was no boys, no this, no that and all of that stuff. And then, I became a professional ballet dancer. And I danced with Ballet Magnificat, and that is a Christian ballet company. And I immersed myself in my career and my livelihood, everything was evolved was around that, so for three years I toured with Ballet Company and their whole message was about proclaiming the gospel through ballet.

A: That's interesting. I understand that though. The whole encompassing culture. It's not only dogma, it's culture.

D: It had to be. I woke up every morning and before we did ballet, we had to have a 45-minute praise and worship to the Lord and dedicate our day to God. And then we had ballet class and then rehearsal...but everything was all about giving to God. That was my informative years, I was 19, 20, and 21. And it was...you know you are so curious but all of that had to be pushed down. Anyways, then I got married at 21. And I was with him for 3 years and then, I had my awakening time when I was 25 and I thought, I can't do this anymore. Oh, let me say that when I was 21 and got married, we moved here to Massachusetts, so I was in this very conservative lifestyle being in the South. Mississippi is even deeper rooted in the South and Southern ways and the conservative Christian and being immersed in the whole thing but then we moved up here and it's liberal and it was so mind-

blowing for me and I don't know how to deal with this. I had been so in a bubble for so long.

A: Absolutely

D: Totally awoken...just the small things, you might get this, but just the small things like, for so many years I was trained that you need to hug, funny cause they don't consider that people could be gay and have attractions for the same sex, but men you had to hug, if you were a female, you had to hug from the side. And so I remember the ballet world, coming to Boston everyone is all touchy, feely, everyone is all open. And I remember hugging guys from the front and being like, is that okay? You know like, second-guessing myself on a hug. I mean this is so ridiculous. So then I started awakening during that time.

A: So your husband at the time, he had also come from the same background and religion?

D: Yep. Born-again Christian and our main foundation was Christianity, when I look back I think, what did we even have in common at the time.

A: Yeah, I get that. Cause marriage is different in a very conservative religion.

D: Right, we were virgins and the whole thing.

A: You don't really know anything about yourself. You are not allowed.

D; Yes...Exactly, Exactly! So at 25, I am finally asking questions a lot of people said they were asking at 17, I did all that crazy stuff at 16, I was exploring then. And I said, well I wasn't allowed! No, but I totally agree with you but I watch people in the church sometimes and think, you need to pop...there is so much more to you! And you are getting squished down...So anyway, at 25 I decided (to leave) some things brought that on, life situations, at the time we had two miscarriages, that was a big deal looking back now, it was so devastating at the time because my goal and role in my mind was...be a woman...and have children. So...

A: That's one of my questions, what is the role of women in your religion?

D: That is how I felt that in my culture. Now, I moved up here and it was way more liberal and even in the church, I should remark, the church we went to here was a Vineyard church and they are much more liberal. So I went from a Pentecostal and I would say Ballet Magnificat is a very Pentecostal way so if you research these words, they might be deeper. I don't know what they would say, but Vineyard is much more relaxed.

A: Okay

D: Much more liberal. More accepting. We would go to events and they would drink alcohol and I would be like, we are drinking?!

A: So you weren't allowed, the rules were no drinking. But you could dance because you were in the ballet

D: Right, that was acceptable. Drinking was... also I had an alcoholic father, so drinking in my family was also shunned. I was 21 at the time but in every gathering at the Vineyard out at Framingham at the time, there was drinking...so different. Because, I don't know why, it just seems, that was so freeing for me. So I had Vineyard Christian friends and I had the ballet friends that I was performing with when I moved here so I think the two different worlds, I've always had two different worlds, I have always had ballet friends, I always had church friends. I think that is why I walked on both sides so much.

D: And when I started getting older I was leaning on this side cause I was just realizing things that I needed to realize. So, I encountered so many different people up here that started making me question things. Oh, but the miscarriages brought up things that I didn't realize about myself such as the whole thing about being a woman and feeling like my role as a woman in the church needed to be, to have children, so if I didn't fulfill that I was not being a good enough Christian. This is pressure that I don't know where I got it from because it's just within the silent culture, I can't explain it. You know? My mom didn't sit there and say have children; she was a divorcee herself and went to school with three kids and got a masters degree and has her own business. She wasn't like, do that! But somehow I got that through the culture or whatever. So it wasn't necessarily within my family as it was within the culture.

A: Definitely, yeah.

D: So that's how my Christian path was. And how immersed I was in it.

A: How much to you participate in it now?

D: Oh...nothing! Nothing! I don't even know if I believe in God. I am questioning that now. My husband is probably an atheist. I always tell him, I can't say I'm atheist because that feels like I'm turning my back on my family if I say that. Strange? Right?

A: I get it.

D: I'm only hanging on to not saying that because I feel like it would hurt them more. Cause I've already done so much damage even though its their issues (laughs) but still, when I went through the divorce that was a huge deal, I lost my family during that time. They were very upset with me.

A: That's brave. Did you have a support system for yourself here.

D: Not at the time, I was 25, so young. I guess you can say in a way I did, I shouldn't say that. I was dancing then. I got into the company in...I didn't end up getting into Boston Ballet, but I got into the Jose Mateo's Ballet theatre which is in Cambridge. And...I decided, instead of auditioning again when I got my divorce, I stayed there because that was the only support group I had. So I did have more of a support group than I realized at the time. Looking back. And he was always like a very fatherly, Jose, the director, he was a very fatherly, loving person, willing to help. Very supportive. He helped me find a house to live in and stuff like that. So I went through the divorce and I left my religion at the same time.

A: What did you enjoy most in regards to the religion that you grew up in and what did you enjoy least?

D: Lets see, what did I enjoy least? All the unspoken pressure. The unspoken pressure to be this certain way, to perform this certain way. The judgment that came if you didn't do things the same way and so for me being a people pleaser, to just mold myself in a way, no one knew I was a closet swearer, now I curse up a storm. (laughing) I love it it's so freeing...But I didn't want anyone to know I did that.

A: So it was really that you weren't yourself?

D: Right

A: There wasn't authenticity or truth?

D: Yeah! I just had to be this certain way for them. And the people pleaser that I am easily did it.

A: What was the positive of it?...Or if there is one...

D: Yeah...sometimes I say the community because there is an automatic community but I also had the community within my dance world too so I didn't feel it was so gone but...the community is probably the first thing I think about, if I was going to say anything.

A: I understand that, completely.

D: But I felt like I was way more myself with my dance friends than I ever was with the church friends, you know?

A: Did you recognize that disparity at the time, in the moment? Did you have guilt?

D: Oh all the time, I still deal with the guilt thing, part of it. And one of the things my dance teacher would always say before, you are too humble, your church makes you too humble. You need to be way more proud and take charge of how good of a dancer you are. And I would be like, but I am doing this for God and I'm not supposed to be glorified...and...you know what I'm saying?...I think it really tainted me being...I don't know how much of it was my personality and how much of it was tainting me being the dancer I could have been and should have been. I mean I had a really great career; I was a professional for many years, for fifteen years. I had a really great career but, I don't know, I just think it kept me...not allowing me to take the pride in my kind of...I thought it was wrong to be proud.

D: Like I had to be this humble person, does that make sense?

A: Yeah! Absolutely! Do you think that's the culture of the religion or the culture of women? Or both?

D: Both! I think it's both. And I think women are very suppressed in the church, so much. So..so often.

A: How did you first learn about mindfulness meditation?

D: At Lesley. But I was already on the journey...so...I had stopped dancing and decided to try something else. So I worked at a yoga studio. So that was a very different culture shock for me too.

A: Yoga is scary to religious people.

D: Yes, but I also found it to be very dogmatic.

A: That's true. It can be.

D: The situation, the place I was at had a feeling like I was back in the church.

A: That's interesting.

D: Yeah...(laughing)...so I walked away from that too. I am not being a part of anything that makes me feel or think like I need to be a certain way.

A: I get triggered like that.

D: Yeah..SO sensitive to it! So, which is funny because when I took my first mindfulness class, I was one of the people who, with Nancy, I was like, I don't



believe in this stuff. I would say, I don't understand, I don't want to be boxed in. Why can't I scratch my leg when I want to scratch my leg, Nancy, in the middle of meditation...And Nancy in her one hundred million words would say, you know Desiree, it's not about that, it's more about can you control your mind...And I was like, I don't want to because to me it felt...at the time...like it felt like the mindfulness class or the approach of mindfulness was very similar to the church. But that was me putting the only lens I knew onto it.

A: Okay

D: So, I had a hard time with it at the beginning. I didn't know I would take the...I didn't know I would finish the whole program.

A: What was your first class?

D: Her first one.

A: The practice and theory?

D: yeah

A: me too...

A: So you finished the whole certificate program?

D: Yeah...I took all four

A: All four...so, practice and theory, communication, leadership and...

D: um...it was an integrated one...

A: okay

D: I did the four, we were grandfathered in...we were all undergrads and we were grandfathered and could take it and get the certification...

A: That's great, yeah

D: Yeah..So I got a Holistic Psychology degree and then I got the certification. I was like, Yes!, I want these two big things...and I designed a whole...I have my own business designed around it...

A: oh you do! So that is my next question, describe your current mindfulness practice.

D: So, since having the baby...I designed a whole program where, I guess you can say I'm a coach, I designed it myself so I am still working...

A: So do you consider yourself a life coach?

D: yeah...not an official title...and within it I teach the mindfulness practices. I cater it to whoever I am working with, if it's a group or one on one. Sometimes I work on communications, sometimes I work on leadership, sometimes I work on segments and it's woven through out my whole program.

A: Is it based on insight meditation or...vipassanna...or Jon Kabat-Zinn?

D: Jon Kabat-Zinn. A lot more of that work. Yeah. And for myself, meditating, I don't...I definitely meditated all through my pregnancy but then you have the kid...It's just one more thing to do...mommy's still trying to get her body back...her ballet body (laughing) so working out is my meditation.

A: Well I do really think that's a practice...yoga? Walking? I think mindfulness is a big blanket and then whatever practice you bring to it.

D: Absolutely. Agreed I also think that mindfulness has helped me be in the moment and understand that this is only temporary. I feel so relaxed for being...I thought I would be more anxious than I am...It helps me feel like a calmer person in general so my parenting is calmer, I don't know.

A; Yeah! How do you think mindfulness has affected you, and affected your relationship that you have with religion and your journey in religion or out of religion? However you would describe it for yourself.

D: Well, I feel like I have something that anchors me. It allows me to keep a spiritual side of myself that was so important for so many years and I didn't know where to put it. And so mindfulness, I definitely have a place to go, having that as my spiritual practice. What else was part of the question?

A: How do you see religion differently having had this mindfulness practice? And also, what I'm hearing from you, your family is part of the religion too, how has mindfulness affected that loss or the community or your journey through this religious process?

D: I think that it's given me insight in their process, that other people are on their own journey, and I'm less angry. I feel like mindfulness taught me that about process, about the pace, everyone's difference pace. I think that mindfulness can correlate with their religions, with religions if they are interested but there is so much fear around it; people are going to think it's of the devil, they are going to have their soul taken away from them even if they try meditating, you know, cause of the sad connotation that comes with it. But I think mindfulness could

really benefit so many people. In the church and in my family, for those who practice it.

A: How has it affected the guilt or understanding of the oppression of women? Those kind of cultural thinking or has it affected any of those things or not?

D: I don't know if I can say that because I feel like that had already shifted so much in me before I had found mindfulness cause I had been five years, six years...away from the church...so I feel like I had already started the process, that little thought process then, I don't know if it changed anything taking the mindfulness on for me...in that aspect.

A: Do you think you had worked out all of the issues of guilt and how you said you felt women were oppressed, all of that, you had worked that out and mindfulness really didn't have anything to do with any of that?

D: I don't really feel...no...I don't see that tying together...right now...in my head.

A: What role, if any, did it play in a healing process for you?

D: One, it gave me a spiritual place. An anchor. Because when I learned to quiet myself to be in the moment, I stopped running away from so many emotions and working through them. Those were a big deal. I remember one of my meditations, I still to this day, in class, we had to do all this meditation as part of the homework and I remember just sobbing one night, and I was all alone and I had really never dealt with loneliness. And I had a bit of a panic attack in it. And I made it through. And I remember making it through. It's okay. You're not alone. You're your best friend. I learned to be my best friend instead of needing other people to fulfill that for me, you know?

A: Absolutely understand that, all of that, totally.

D: Yeah and if I hadn't of taken the time to quiet myself down in a meditation, you know, you meditate if you are walking you meditate if you are running. This was just being still, completely still, I learned how to be still. As a dancer, it was really hard to be still. And running away from so many of my emotions, being still, it was as if all of the things I had been dealing with were surrounding me. I didn't want to see them, but I was getting better. I was better at looking at them. I am okay with this. And I think the mindfulness really helped with that. I do attribute some of it to the degree I decided to get which is Holistic Psychology. While I was on the path of getting the certification, I was also getting the Psychology degree too. So there was so much looking in the mirror.

A: What about becoming more true to yourself or authentic, do you feel like mindfulness helped you get there?

D: I have always been a really authentic person. I mean, I know I performed a lot for people in the church and I would be one person some place but there was still an aspect of me. I remember people in the church saying, Desiree, your being so loud. And I would be like, why not? I'm happy! But we were supposed to be (whispering) quiet and submissive...women, right? I think I was just more comfortable with myself...yeah, yeah. I taught me to quiet down...to become more comfortable with me. I think it did contribute to that. For sure. But also I'm getting older so I feel like perhaps it ties in with that and just being okay with different things, you know, I don't know.

A: That's what mindfulness did for me really, mostly just freed me.

D: Right. yeah, yeah. That's interesting. And I think it calmed me down. Dealt with my fears. Yeah, really tough on my fears. Looked them in the eye.

A: A lot of stuff to be afraid of, when you are in that kind of religion. Well, I guess the last question really is, where do you want to take mindfulness from here and what part do you want it to play in your life?

D: Yeah, well I put it in my business, so I really just want to...spread the word?...spread the gospel...(laughing)...how crazy is that? Right? You need to do what I'm doing! (laughing) You will be much better

D: Everybody needs this...so I incorporated in my business because I think it is so important. My business is Movement in Mindfulness. So movement is a huge part of my program. I don't know if that is the full name I will keep forever, but that is what I started with and that's where I am, so, mindfulness and movement are my two key things I work with. And...I hope to integrate it with him (baby), I mean, I even take walks with him and we don't need to talk all the time. We can just sit and look; I didn't do these things, I feel like. I didn't just take in the moment as much as I do now. So I want to teach it to him, I want to integrate it into his life somehow. I got a book called mindfulness birthing.

A: Nice.

D: And tried to put it there. I am just trying to putting it everywhere in my life, wherever I can. I am going to research mindfulness parenting, what does that mean? What does that look like? You know?

A: I think Jon Kabat-Zinn and his wife wrote a book.

D: About parenting?

A: Yeah

D: okay, I'm going to have to check that out.

A: I really like his version of mindfulness as well

D: I do too. I feel like it's not dogmatic...I remember asking him when he was there, how would he deal with a family that's Born again Christian? And he said, oh great question, I forget how I asked it. I formed in a way. He was so excited, he said, let's talk about this.

A: Yeah...he's great like that.

D: Absolutely

A: Well thank you, thank you, thank you. I don't want to keep you anymore but I do appreciate this (D. Reese-Mottard, personal communication, November 10, 2015).

### **Tatiana Scoll – The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon)**

Forty-year-old Tatiana Scoll was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or better known as the Mormon Church. She now resides in Western Massachusetts. The following is a short recourse of the history of Mormonism.

Mormonism began along side many revivalist churches such as the Pentecostal church, written about above, also believing “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the complete restoration of Christ’s original church on earth” (Mormon History, 2016). However, it was during the much earlier revivalist time period of the 1820’s. During the ‘age of Enlightenment,’ which has been defined as the Christian’s response to secularism or the religious revival in the early eighteen hundreds, a young man named Joseph Smith was making the rounds in Palmyra, New York to many of the tent revival meetings, investigating many of the prevalent religions of the day. The popular story is that he was confused by the many different doctrines and disagreements between prominent church clergy. While reading the bible in the New Testament of St. James, he felt inspired to go to a grove of trees to pray. This was in the early spring of 1820. While

there, he claims to have had a vision of God, the Father and of his son, Jesus Christ, telling him that none of these religions were true and that he should wait for further knowledge and instructions from Them (Mormon History, 2016).

Three years later, Joseph Smith claims to have received another angelic visitation describing to him where golden plates were hidden within the earth and how he would translate this record into another set of Holy Scriptures. This would eventually be called *The Book of Mormon*. This first publication of *The Book of Mormon* was in March of 1830. By this time, Joseph Smith had been married to Emma Hale and there were many baptisms into the not-quite organized church. Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, who had been Joseph's scribe, were the first in 1829. The baptisms were administered after the example of total immersion from some biblical writings and scriptures (Brodie, 1971).

Smith sent missionaries out to surrounding areas and started to have many followers. But he was also plagued with adversarial opposition due to the notoriety of his religious stories, so he had a 'revelation' that the church should gather in Kirtland, Ohio. Between the years of 1831 and his death in 1844, Joseph Smith led the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and was the mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois where the 'saints,' as the members of the church called themselves, gathered after much persecution. He also started his own bank, ran for president, and married many wives that he denied publically, many times. His legal wife, Emma Hale Smith often didn't know about his plural marriages. For the rest of her life Emma Smith denied polygamy stating, "There was no revelation on either polygamy or spiritual wives," she vehemently stated. "He had no other wife but me...He did not have improper relations with any woman that ever

came to my knowledge” (Brodie, P. 399.). This statement was most likely not true but as historians agree this was probably “her revenge and solace for all of her heartache and humiliation” (Brodie, p. 399) and (Riess, 2014).

His death culminated partly due to his practice of polygamy but mainly because of his trying to control the printing of a newspaper called the *Nauvoo Expositor*, which printed stories regarding his practice of plural marriage. He ordered the town marshal to destroy the printing press causing him to be arrested for the charge of destroying the press and also a charge of treason against the state of Illinois. While awaiting trial, he was shot and killed by a mob, many of those who had been members of the church or who he had been in business with (Schindler, 1996).

The church went through a period of transition and splitting but the majority of the members followed Brigham Young, the second president of the church, across the plains to Salt Lake City, Utah where the majority of members still now reside. Brigham Young and the next several ‘prophets’ or presidents of the church practiced polygamy until the 1890 Manifesto banning plural marriage. Mormon Historian Michael Quinn states:

On 24 September 1890, President Wilford Woodruff issued his famous Manifesto which stated in part, ‘...I deny that either forty or any other number of plural marriages have during the period [since June 1889] been solemnized in our temples or in any other place in the Territory,’ and concluded, ‘And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden of the law of the land’ (Quinn, 2004).

It has been suggested that the end of polygamy was due to pressure from the United States government to end the practice in order to become part of the union and to stop continued opposition and legal issues against the people located in the far west (Schindler, 1996).

Today mainstream Mormons do not practice polygamy. But, in my opinion, it still affects the women of the church today. Church leaders today are fond of saying, “women's unique roles are equal, valued, needed” (Campus Education Week, Ballard, August 20, 2014). However, women still do not hold any positions of leadership within the hierarchy of Mormonism. Women are often encouraged to stay at home and the very doctrine of the church embodies the role of women to be subservient in their career ambitions. In an official document called, *The Proclamation to the World*, church officials stated on September 1991, “By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (Church Authority, 2016).

Finally, the most telling thing to me is the fact that Mormon children, youth and adults, are not taught about any of these polygamist women in a church setting, Sunday School, or even Seminary, which is a formal education that Mormon teenagers receive for four years in high school. Unless researched, the names of Joseph Smith's polygamist wives will not be heard.

Following is the interview with Tatiana Scoll:

A: How did you come to be affiliated with the Mormon Church?

T: I grew up in it. My parents were members; I was the oldest. And my dad was recently converted. My mom is a lifelong member and he met her and took the



discussions and got baptized and then they got married. 6 months later they wanted him to be a bishop. They were sealed before the one-year mark by permission from President Kimball (prophet) so that he could be a bishop. So they were very involved and we were very active.

It was a very big part of our life growing up. My dad was bishop for the first seven years of my life and then the ward boundaries changed and we went to a different ward. A couple years later, he was called to be bishop again. So for almost twelve years he was a bishop and my mom was always doing Relief Society presidencies stuff or Young Women's presidency stuff. So she was always really busy with it. So it was always there. It was always big. We always had Family Home Evenings and scripture reading. We were the family that had scripture reading before school and you know the long Family Home Evenings with the fighting, 'but we're going to get through that lesson even if it's two and half hours long.'

A: Isn't it brutal what we did to ourselves. I did that to our kids too.

T: Yeah...they just pushed us and pushed us. So it was always there. And I was the kind of girl that really wanted to be good. I felt like the beginnings of my testimony probably came at 4 or 5 years old. I felt so good singing primary songs and then I felt so good hearing the stories of Jesus. I had a little bit of a questioning phase in my teenage years where the world suddenly got bigger and I could imagine a world without Mormonism.

A: Questioning because of school education? Because of friends? Because of...

T: Just thinking.

A: Thinking...

T: Just realizing that this could all be a story and there might be no God. So I went through a little bit of time where I sort of swam around in that field of thought and I wasn't unhappy about it like if there was no God that was okay with me. It would be still a big, wonderful universe and you know it would have been okay. But the all those years of hearing the messages came back and then I would start to have an emotional response in the testimony meeting or reading my scriptures. So then I felt like I was getting my own answers from God and this was true and developed what I felt like was my own testimony of it and I really wanted to, I really didn't want family, didn't want kids.

A: Oh!

T: And maybe I would get married in my thirties. Maybe I would have children or adopt in my forties. I really wanted to be a doctor.

A: Wow!

T: I really wanted to study neurology and the brain. And I wanted to explore the relation of things like quantum physics in neural components and how synapses would transfer information and energetic fields in the body, brain, and the mind. For fun, I would be reading about consciousness and whatever the latest study was. You know, I was a 15 year old. That was what I wanted my life to be. And I applied to BYU (Brigham Young University) cause I needed a back up school and I didn't want my backup school to be KU. I did not want to stay in Kansas. I hated the small town.

T: I got the acceptance letter and threw it on the floor and waited for the other ones to come in. And it ate at me. And I kept thinking that that was the place I should go. And all of those messages of what a good Mormon girl would do, right, and so I ended up at BYU. And then kind of in the same way, I ended up dropping my major and cause I thought I shouldn't pursue a career.

A: What did you study at BYU?

T: I started in Science and then I went to Education cause I thought, oh, I could get a quick degree, I will be able to support myself if I ever needed to. I could teach if I ever needed to. And I had an interest in that as well and so I thought it worked all right but...it wasn't what I really wanted.

A: Did you go on a mission before you finished BYU?

T: Yeah, I didn't graduate from BYU. I did two years and then I went on a mission to Ukraine. And that was 1997 to 1998, I was there.

A: Was it a proselyting mission?

T: Yes

A: In the Ukraine?

T: In the Ukraine, and it was kind of a modified level of proselyting. So we were not allowed to wear nametags for almost my whole mission. And we weren't allowed to knock on doors. Besides it being very culturally weird, they didn't want us to as part of our agreement with the country and being there on our visas, they just didn't want us to do that. So we didn't. And that was good...actually.

A: And what was your experience on your mission...good, or bad or...

T: I would say it was traumatizing. I was sick for most of my mission. I got sick in the MTC (Missionary Training Center) and I thought it was just the food. I mean I was sick every day and I had really tried to kind of work through it and not

have it be a problem but I had, this is awful to say, I had diarrhea every day. And I had, eventually I got to the point where I was bleeding internally.

A: Oh my gosh!

T: And I was really weak and it was really bad.

A: Did you share that or not so much?

T: No when it was that bad, I had been out for 10 months or so and then the mission president was made aware of it and I think they sent me to see somebody and they gave me some ulcer meditation, which didn't really help but it got me past the worst part of it and then it was 6 months later or so and I was still not doing well and they sent me to Germany for tests. And then they sent me home. I actually came home two or three months early.

A: And was that traumatic? Or were you good? Were you peaceful about it?

T: No it was okay that I came home. I think what was traumatic for me was that the experience was so painful. And I really struggled with the junior leadership, you know, the boys who were my district leaders and they wanted to know what I did every minute. I mean literally, I was supposed to account for every minute. So I had a hard time with those kinds of things. So there was like this phoniness that I could never get to and I could never be the missionary that was doing what they were told to do because that was the right things... I was just all intuitive and instinct and if you connect with somebody you kind of feel what they might need in their life or whatever. So that was kind of hard. That I couldn't fit well...

A: You didn't feel like you fit?

T: Yeah...but I still felt like I was, at that point, especially, I really loved what to me was the real gospel and what was the real message and the real blessings of faith and all of that so... So that was hard. But I came back and I didn't feel like I had a struggle with the church, it was just that I had a struggle with the leadership.

A: Were you able to capture that in the moment? Or do you have to look back on it?

T: No. I think some of it I can identify. And then some of the bigger stuff I was still not really addressing. I knew I didn't like having that many Mormons around me. I didn't like being around them. I didn't like everyone thinking the same things. And kind of pressuring each other to think the same things. The narrowness was really hard for me and I really only had one class (at BYU) I liked. And the other classes I was disappointed in. I mean I really thought this was kind of lame. Well I had given up the direction I wanted anyway. So, of course, I am going to think its lame learning how to teach 2 plus 2 to...5 year olds, you

know. So I was not happy with that academically and then I didn't like the rules of it, like the church presence, aside from the population being Mormon, I didn't like the church presence that overlapped into my life and told me I couldn't have a guy in my room, for example. I didn't want to be told what to do as an adult and that really bothered me and I felt like that oppression was always there.

A: What is your level of participation in Mormonism right now?

T: Presently, I do not attend at all. And I am having my named removed and I am expecting the letter in the mail or actually email because I took care of it that way.

A: Wow!

T: So my participation in the Church is minimal. Other than trying to combat the evil influence of the theology of the Church.

A: In your mind?

T: No, no, no. In others' minds; it affects me, as far as, my husband still goes and takes the kids.

A: Oh. Wow! How does that work for you guys?

T: It doesn't. It's really hard. I mean it's been very, very difficult for me. But I'm trying...so my level of activity in the church now is trying to undo some damage that I think is there. It's trying to provide alternative perspective to my children and my spouse. And it's trying to explain to others where I think the damage in the church is. So that's my involvement in the church.

A: Did this start, obviously this started in California before you got here?

T: The unraveling of my faith was sort of slow. But I didn't see the transitions as they were happening until the final unravel which was this spring of 2014, last year. The steps that led up to that over several years time were a distancing of myself of everything church. I can remember bearing testimony that it was all true and that I believed all of it and actually from the point that I said that forward I can't remember when I stopped thinking that but there were times that I would realize that I don't believe this anymore or I think this is different. I understand this differently than they teach it and there were some points that I realized that this is a difference and then there were times that I didn't realize that I was separating. Right? But I got to the point where I had been teaching primary (Sunday school for children ages 3-12.) I was president for 5, 6 years and there were all these different shifts so I got to the point that I just didn't believe that children received a gift of the Holy Ghost, that there was a gift of the Holy Ghost, that there was a demarcation where this child before eight couldn't have whatever the Gift of the Holy Ghost was with them. And that really bothered me and then

there were things that really bothered me like were children really being baptized and having their sins washed away? Like their sins for a day? Really? And why should they be relieved to have their sins washed away if they don't have any. You know there are all these things cause I was always thinking about it and mulling it over, so I started separating. I didn't believe in this Gift or whatever. I didn't think that the temple ordinances were necessary but that they helped us feel a tie to God. It was nice if we could feel it there. It was nice for some people who were able to.

A: Kind of like a ritual as in other churches, like, before I became a Mormon my mom was Catholic, all of my family was Catholic, so even now I appreciate some of those rituals but I don't think they are necessary for your soul. So something like that?

T: Right! So I lost the literalism. I was still holding on to priesthood keys as being true restored, real keys of power (but I had a friend, a woman saying), I can't believe that anymore and it hurts me. And I could understand where she was coming from. And I didn't think that Mormonism was required for her. So I sort of had branched over to this side of thinking that if Mormonism hurts too much, you don't need it. It's okay and God is still going to be okay with you and beyond that I don't even understand why anyone would believe in the church. And the same-sex marriage issue was a big issue where I was in California, the prop 8 thing. We had the visit from the...stake president, no, it was someone in the bishopric, you know, the stake presidency has been asked by the Seventies to...they know our tithing (10% of income) amount so they came to us with a number (to donate.) Of how many thousands of dollars they wanted us to donate by that weekend.

A: I had heard that but when you lived in other places, they said that that wasn't true. That that's not really happening.

T: Wow. It was really happening.

T: And...so...I was Laurel (Sunday School for 16-18 year old girls) advisor, and the stake president wanted to have a special meeting with the youth in our ward during Sunday School hour to talk about how Mormons weren't gay haters, we weren't haters, he wanted to tell them this so that they would know that they were in a church that was loving and accepting. And they didn't want the leaders to be there. They didn't want me to sit there and hear what my Laurels were going to be taught. And it really bothered me and I went. And I stayed there. I had to have special permission. My husband had talked to the stake president (a male with Priesthood authority) and I had to have special permission to be in there to hear what they were going to tell my Laurels and then I would talk to my Laurels about it the next week or the week after, cause I was really, really troubled by it. But all of that turned out to be secondary to the real impetus. I had been homeschooling (her children) for seven years. They were all too young for Seminary but I thought

we could do some church history cause we were studying that 1800 time period and I thought I'm kind of fuzzy on when Kirtland was compared to Nauvoo compared to the Far West. I kind of want to firm that all up and I want my kids to know, the *Book of Mormon* was published 5 years apart from such and such, and where were the Saints during the Civil War. I kind of wanted them to have that in history placed better, because I didn't. So I started this with my kids and you can imagine when you first start looking at the history, as history to present, my first problem was, why don't I know this stuff? Why don't I know what happened in Kirtland with the bank? And that was a real problem but then one day, I showed the kids the PBS film about Joseph Smith, *American Prophet*... I showed them that because I had previewed it and I thought it was very favorable. I liked how it had this historical feel. And then the show is over and my kids were like, mom, we didn't know Joseph Smith had other wives. And why was that okay?

T: So, polygamy for me, I mean I have this whole back-story for myself with my conflict with polygamy. I remember sitting across from them, we were doing scripture reading at night when they finally asked me, and I was sitting across from them and I looked at them and in a flash I thought I am their teacher, I teach them everything, you know they trust what I'm going to tell them. It has to be what I really think about this and I couldn't just repeat what I'd been told. And so I said something the best I could that we don't know why that happened. Joseph Smith felt like it was the right thing to do and that's about all I can tell you. But I wasn't okay with that. So I dug into it again. And I had been through everything I could find at BYU and I'd been through every journal I could find at the library and through all the stuff in the restricted areas I wasn't supposed to go through. I mean, I had really read just about everything and been traumatized by that too. Polygamy was a really hard thing for me. So when I got back into it and I started reading online; there was a lot more I could find than in the BYU library.

A: Your husband knew you were researching?

T: He knew about the polygamy but he didn't know that I had been willing to read about everything else. And I didn't share it because he was so angry with friends who were leaving the church. And I didn't think there was really a rush, I was kind of talking about stuff as slowly as I could, in the meantime, my husbands assistant at work died of a brain hemorrhage, and then his cousin killed himself. He was gay.

A: LDS? (Latter-day Saints)

T: Yeah. And then his grandfather died. So in the summer we had a funeral every month. And then he had two or three other ones, not related. Anyway, so it was a really hard summer. This was how my faith was dissolving, what I was hanging onto I couldn't trust that anymore. And I wasn't really talking about it yet but I was talking about the polygamy and there was a while that I thought maybe it was true that Joseph didn't do this and he was framed because Brigham Young swept

in afterwards and he married all the same women so, of course, they had a vested interest in saying Joseph did it. So I kind of toyed with this. I knew I didn't like Brigham Young. There were a lot of reasons I didn't like Brigham Young. So I held on to Joseph, hoping it was all Brigham's fault. And I lived in that sort of half belief for a while. I am realizing how its affected me and its affected my marriage. Dramatically. One day I realized I didn't believe it anymore. It didn't make sense. It couldn't. It came down to all of the reasons that it wasn't what I thought it was. And then the reasons it was still what I thought it was were only handful of feelings I had. All the body of evidence and everything else pointed to it just being baloney but what did those feelings mean so I kinda had to stew over that and came to a different conclusion about what they meant. And I called my friend who had left the church, she was the only one I could talk to and even at that point I was still like I think I'm letting go

A: It's powerful when it happens, physically even.

T: The day that I fell apart, we were getting ready for homeschooling blessings, priesthood blessings for the kids, blessings before school...I always got a blessing right before that too. And I had debated should I ask him not to do that this year? And I just didn't want to have the conflict. I wasn't ready to do anything different. (Even) when you don't believe the church you can still be devastated by it. I was still devastated that my husband saw me this way and I was devastated that I was still living this way and I wanted to just, I wanted obliteration, I didn't want to live, I didn't want an eternity, I didn't want to exist in an eternity. So I didn't want to just die because I would wake up to this other reality where people still thought I was a nothing person because that's how I felt in Mormonism. And so I wanted just obliteration. To just cease. I was so unhappy. And heavy. I couldn't do it a moment longer and so he knew when he came home something was wrong with me and I don't even know if we talked, I don't think we talked that night, maybe we did the next morning. And I took off my garments (Mormon ceremonial underclothes); I took off my garments that night. So in the morning I said I'm never putting them back on and I don't believe this anymore. And it was terrible. But that's how it all unraveled.

A: That's intense. Did he try to convince you?

T: At first I think he was just in shock and wanted it to be temporary. And I probably presented it as it feels like I have this thorn in me and I have to take it out. I have to step away from this. I've got to step back. This hurts me too much and I can't continue with this. So he wanted it to be temporary and he wanted to argue it out and he wanted me to, and this was really hard, but he wanted me to follow him. He wanted me to rely on his testimony and follow...

A: In his priesthood...

T: And, so then the arguing about it was pretty intense.

A: It was interesting to me that your husband wanted you to follow him in the priesthood, so can you describe to me what that feels like as a woman in the church and what you think the role of women should be in the church?

T: I think the strongest influence came pretty early on young. You see what men do and what women don't do. And the polygamy thing for me overlays everything that comes back to the doctrine of what is a woman and what's a woman's role and place because of her gender, right? Because of her parts...this is what she has to do. And for me, I think that a lot of what I carried the rest of my life came from 132 (Doctrine & Covenants section 132-recent Mormon revelation received by Joseph Smith). I can remember reading it as a 15 year old for seminary and for me it was like an assault, this is who you are now. This is what God says about women. And the language used in that is just horrible. A woman is to be given and taken. She's property really. She's just an extra crown for a man and for me that was really painful because it was wrapped up in the 'New and Everlasting Covenant' (Joseph Smith revelation). It was wrapped up with eternity and exaltation. There is no way to separate that. There was no way to have a Celestial Kingdom without this section. The greatest thing about the restoration is that you had sealings (marriage for time and eternity within a Mormon Temple) were...the law is polygamy. Even if we weren't practicing this anymore in our church this is an eternal law. This is what women were and this is what they were supposed to do and it crushed me that that is all I would be worth as a woman. But I couldn't fight it so I carried it as a private, shameful, I don't know, it really felt like I was branded. I was property and I had to do this. And if I didn't I would be destroyed because that's the language of 132. If a woman doesn't accept it, she will be destroyed anyway. So she has no choices and no power she just...the only tiny happiness she might have isn't her own. It's all about the man. It's all about the man.

And so that was huge for me. That was fundamental and it was imprinted in my soul that as much as I might hate it and as much as I might want something else, this eternal truth was that my purpose was for someone else's happiness. And I lived that way. Sacrificed my dreams and what path of life I wanted, and career, whatever, and I married earlier than I wanted to. And I had the children and in living that life, I continued to always base it on that foundation that my happiness could only be somebody else's. Cause I could never really be happy anyways. It always hurt. And I thought I would be clear of that pain, and the anguish of it and I just wasn't. So I got married and it started to plague me, 'is my husband going to be with someone else?' And I don't remember if my husband started the comments first or if comments started because I was worried about it but he couldn't say he wouldn't do it. He would talk about, 'what if your sister needed to be married to be able to get into the Celestial Kingdom, wouldn't you want her in heaven with you?' (Chuckle) 'No, I sure didn't' (laughing). And I would wake up from nightmares. I would have nightmares about him sleeping with other women and I would wake up and my pillow would be wet, literally wet and I would be sobbing. And the whole next day I would be teary. And my husband didn't know what to do with that. But he would make jokes about it. And



you should think about doing that better because the second wife might do that better.

A: That's brutal.

T: It killed me. But I didn't feel like I could fight it. Because doctrinally I couldn't fight it and say, you are never going to have to do that, you know, don't fantasize about it, it's not happening. But I couldn't carve out any space for myself to feel comfortable. The affect was that I was always competing with ghost wives. I was competing with the people I thought he would love later on. It affected every interaction and it affected everything I did with him. I didn't want to be too negative. I didn't want to complain too much. I wanted to be sure he was very, very happy. Because I wanted to be the favorite, even if I didn't stay the favorite forever.

A: So you were living polygamy anyway.

T: I was totally living it. I was living it in the kitchen. I was living it in family budget talks. I was living it in family vacations, I hope he remembers this trip eternities from now, remembers this fondly, even though he will be loving someone else. I was tormented by it. I was tormented by it in bed. I was always giving and giving and competing but I couldn't show up as myself.

A: Yes

T: I couldn't negotiate as an equal partner because I always wanted to be sure he was happy. So...the role of women for me now in church I think they are stuck. I think they are stuck in their all their teachings cause that's the root of a woman's role. I think they can let a woman say a prayer and pretend like that's a big deal. They can't do much more than that and I think they will probably never be able to move to a healthy place. I think it's a really unhealthy place for women.

A: Wow. That was going to be my next question. Thank you. Thank you for answering that. That's poignant to me. Kind of switching gears... how would you describe your mindfulness practice or meditation practice and then I'll do a combination of how you first learned about it and then what your practice is.

T: When I was probably a sophomore in high school, so maybe 16, I picked up at the library, the book, The Relaxation Response. And so, to me, that was kind of like pure meditation. Its just sit and breath and Om...right.

A: 16! Because the indoctrination of Mormonism doesn't really allow for that kind of...

T: No it was totally outside of the realm. And I knew it was but it was very, as I remember it, it wasn't contradictory, it wasn't saying you have to give up any

other belief. It was so beneficial, just try it, just breath, you know, and close your eyes and it walks through it all and I thought it was great.

A: So you've been practicing for years and years.

T: Yeah. Now once I started having kids then I didn't have that quiet time anymore. And on a mission and at school, I wasn't a purist but I kind of had that beginning that I considered to be just sort of pure meditation. So I had that idea of it and for me it over-lapped with prayer. But I would never say that to anybody (laughing) Oh No!

A: (laughing) No.

T: There was never admitting that but then there kind of became this over-lap of where I knew some of it was directed at God but some of it was just kind of like a receiving. I pictured it like as a receiving of the peace of God. Right. So during my years of belief, I couldn't rely on there being peace on earth anymore. I didn't even believe that God was blessing people in specific ways, but I believed in a personal peace. You could feel this personal peace and when I was quiet and if I directed my thoughts to God, I could cross into this meditative state and feel this calm. So that was there. Then I got into my life and kids and my family. My oldest son at eight, well at seven he was diagnosed as bi-polar. At eight he was suicidal and hallucinating and paranoid. I always felt like I was going to collapse. I was working so hard to keep him alive and well. And it was very, very hard but I kind of had to have some time where I was re-centering and focusing so that's when I had kind of given it up for a while and I kind of got back into it then. Because if I didn't do that in the morning before he got up, or I didn't go to my room and hide for a few minutes and breath, then I couldn't function because it was so heartbreaking.

T: (Then) my mother-in-law introduced me to the concept of mindfulness meditation. And this was probably 2009 because it was after Isaiah's thing, but she talked to me a little bit about what that meant I thought that was great! I like that idea! If you're at your sink doing your dishes you're at peace and you're all there, you're just all 'there' doing the dishes and living that moment. That was my first introduction to that sort of concept about it. So I would go work in the yard and I would spend all Saturday away from my family and I would just be in the yard and would be pruning the roses or I would be gardening and for me that was a whole day of mindfulness.

A: Sure

T: ...So what happened to me in the process of all this meditation was that slowly I was able to sort of observe what was coming up in me. What happened in my religion and my faith and the framework I built around myself was that I was hiding and I didn't want myself to know how much I hurt. I couldn't face it so

what happened in my meditation was that I would slowly see what that...I could see where I was and what was hurting me and what I was running from or what I was scared of or what I was angry about or whatever. So...

A: Yeah, that's beautiful.

T: I finally had made space for myself to feel in this moment where I am I'm loved and this is safe. I wasn't really admitting to God and myself that this hurts me this much and then do something. I am not going to have to stay there where I am. It's kind of a fluid space and so that as I was doing my researching. What happened eventually then, when I was able to let go of it, was trusting, because I had been with myself, I had finally been with myself enough to know I could trust myself. Cause I'd been away from myself, right?

A: Yes!!

T: I'd been hiding and finally after all that time with myself and feeling that peace with myself and accepting I could see what had happened to me and I didn't need to let it be there anymore.

A: Yeah. That's wonderful.

A: So how does it influence the way you are going to walk forward in this? Your Mindfulness Meditation?

T: It's part of how I live now because what happened after I got to that point of freedom, the walls wanted to come back down on me again because my husband wanted me to be Mormon still and he wanted me to still believe it, still wanted to accept it. So first my church told me that polygamy was good and it was of God and then my husband told me that, right. First the church told me that my role was to accept what I was told and then my husband said that. It's with my husband directly now not with the church and ideology. It's right in front of me. But that's really, really sad and it's a lot of conflict so the meditation for me in the past year has been a lot of supporting myself. I want to cry all the time but I can come to this space where I'm still and I can let go of my thoughts for a little while and I can let go of my feelings even for a while, I can let go of my personality and just kind of be and just rest in this place. And, I mean, I know I'm not altogether letting go of my thoughts and feelings...you come back to them but I started some sort of visual meditation where I was, kind of like sinking, or diving really, really deep pool, like ocean-deep and I feel these things lift off of me. And, so I rest for a while, you know, at the bottom. I know I have to come back up and life comes back but I can rest for a little while. That's been nourishing to me. It keeps me going.

A: I think that's beautiful. How does that affect you in the moment then?

T: When I'm living with more mindfulness, and I'm doing the meditation...I feel like I'm more me and I'm not a tree that's getting blown around all over the place. I feel stable in my life. Other stuff is happening and it affects me and I respond and can give but I'm not getting knocked down. And, so I feel like it gives me solidness or steadiness, it helps me feel like I'm still here, I'm still me and I can respond to things without feeling like its going to destroy me. So, I mean you can imagine after all of these years, with my husband for example, if we have a conflict, my natural inclination has always been to cave. I always satisfy him but now I can stand with my position, now 'I think this,' and 'we should do this,' so it makes me more confident and deliberate in how I want to live. I think it makes me able to choose better. Because I've been mindful I'm able to determine best for me or a situation or whatever. Instead of just...swimming around in not knowing. So I think it helps me to continue to trust myself more.

A: Yeah. That's great. It's the same for me. What are you going to do with all of the guilt and the fear, all the things that the culture, regardless of whether you believe in the religion anymore, perpetuates?

T: It was a way of living. You can't just find a new way of living overnight, right?

A: No, no. Yeah. And so being in touch with all of those particular emotions and feelings, just being aware of them, makes it, like you just said, makes your choices more real and true to yourself, for me anyway.

T: Yeah, Yeah. Right. Because after all those years of automatic living, you know...

A: Yes!

T: I really need the help to remember...

A: That's a good way to put it...automatic living....yeah me too.

T: Everything was decided, you know. I see the church as kind of abusive spiritually. Because it's all about the ways a person is bad or things that are bad about a person. And I think that people are good. And so as I see myself spiritually now it's not a measure of good or bad, its just...precious. You know, life is precious. The being, whatever we are...energy...is good that we can do in life. It's a miracle just to 'Be.'

T: So that's the spirituality that I believe, that's the way I exist now. I love that. I love the present and the life that is miraculous now.

T: Mindfulness, when I rely on it more, in those times when it was really heart-breaking, it helped me because I needed to find the strength from within and I hadn't done that in the past, right, and all of this with my son, it was God that I

was relying on and God disappeared for me for a while so that's when...I think if there was a real critical time where the mindfulness helped me that would have been it. When there was that abandonment, I felt that abandonment. But it was also okay that God was gone. It was...it did me more harm than good anyway. It was okay that He was gone, but it was also a realization that it was me...the mindfulness just really, really helped me then. And it helped me remember that I had found this peace before and I could fill this peace again. And in that place I know that I can trust myself.

A: So anything...last comment?

T: I think the mindfulness has helped me realize more things more quickly and maybe see things differently than even others leaving the church. I see things differently, one thing I wrote a lot of people read. I posted it on reddit, and I compared, it was a poem, and I compared Mormonism as a brothel. Like you're born and raised to follow the man in charge, at 12 you're turned over to his authority, you're expected to explain everything about what you do and what you don't do. And you are given to somebody because that was the temple language that you're given.

A: Yes. You give yourself

T: And I was competing, right, there were other people that I was competing against and, anyway...like for me this was a painful thing I realized that, I totally turned over myself, I felt I owed somebody else an explanation for what I wore as an adult. I had to tell another grown man about my underwear...once a year...whether I was wearing it correctly. That's messed up!! (laughing) So there's kind of this shift...of being like, AHHH! And I think that maybe I got there faster so I've kind of come to this place where I can make a comparison like a brothel...like, I totally gave myself, my sexuality to someone else to take care of.

T: So I think that that comes because of just being open, finally thinking about it more, but the mindfulness part of it and the meditation...That helps free me up quicker. I thought I was free of polygamy, free of the worry, I don't have those beliefs anymore but I hadn't owned my body yet.

A: I totally get that. I get what you're saying. That is very satisfying. I think a lot of women in the world compete against each other but in Mormonism, big time.

T: Yeah...more plastic surgery there...more liposuction...at a young age

A: And then when you own your own body there's no competition because there's nothing else.

T: Yeah!

A: This is beautiful, and it frees you to not only love yourself but to love everybody else's beauty.

T: I can give now. Before I was trying to give and make everyone happy but I was still unhappy. The source of me was still unhappy and now it's just easier to 'BE.' To be with other people.

A: It is. And the truth. And the truth will set you free...(laughing)

T: (laughing) And I can be the truth. Here I am. And it's good.

A: All right! It was beautiful (T. Scoll, personal communication, November 11, 2015).

### **Stacey Klein – Modern Orthodox Judaism**

Stacey Klein currently resides in Brooklyn, New York not far from where she was raised in her community of Modern Orthodox Judaism. She is forty-five years old.

Judaism is not only a religion but is considered an ancestral heritage spanning thousands of years. The following is a brief description of how Modern Orthodoxy distinguished itself from the generalized population of Judaism.

Judaism has had to respond to outside influences through many generations of time. A critical time period was during the scientific advances of the Enlightenment period when Jewish people were also accepted into general society and not segregated as in years past. There are sects of Judaism that reacted to this period by separating themselves as much as possible from mainstream populations and holding true to dogma or the Torah and traditional, cultural rituals. For one particular group, Modern Orthodoxy, there was a belief that it was possible to hold true to the Torah and Jewish observations while still exposing themselves to secular education such as scientific discoveries and modern ideas (Goldberg, 2009).

Samson Raphael Hirsch was a Rabbi from Frankfort, Germany, responsible for founding the neo-orthodoxy philosophy. This was in response to the reformation movement in Judaism, which made it possible to partake in secular activities even though it compromised Jewish law. Modern orthodoxy was able to bridge this gap between ultra Orthodox-Judaism which separated completely from worldly progressive ideas to being able to embrace and keep Jewish laws and customs while still being a culture of learning and participating in the modern world. Much of the prayer books and other literature became more English as well as many clergy. In England, the Chief Rabbi was equivalent in the Jewish faith to the Archbishopric of Canterbury and sanctioned by parliament. This helped somewhat with the anti-semitic views of the time. Although still “the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge only allowed full access to Jews in 1871.... A pragmatic orthodoxy ensued that engaged with the modern world, science, and society but also ensured the continuity of the authority of Jewish law” (Hildesheimer, 2008).

There were many rabbis after this that also embraced orthodoxy by holding to the Torah but also accepting the knowledge of science such as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, being one who was trained in both. “He also ordained more than 2000 rabbis during his tenure as head of RIETS (Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary), a rabbinic school modern orthodox rabbis at Yeshiva University, New York. Through both his students and his collected works, his influence on Modern Orthodoxy is without parallel” (Berman, 2001).

Although these progressive thoughts helped to bring high levels of education into the lives of many Modern Orthodox practicing Jews, there were still many conservative thoughts in regard to general observance to Jewish laws and traditions which included

certain expectations of the fold and in particular women. Although women in Modern Orthodox Judaism are encouraged to become educated, the family is still the center of life. The expectation was to follow rules of chastity and marriage. Marriage outside of the faith was expressly frowned upon. The following statement shows the importance of dogma in Modern Orthodoxy despite its approach to secular learning (Rooke, 2007).

While Modern Orthodoxy differs from the approach of Haredi (extreme) Orthodoxy on most of the issues above, we remain united with them in the theological and halakhic commitments that are at the core of our common tradition. Each of these two experiments is experiencing great success in certain areas and intense problems in others. Both approaches would be better served by a cooperative spirit in which each attempted to help the other maximize its strengths and deal creatively with its weaknesses. A similar spirit should animate all of the varied segments of the Jewish community (Berman, 2014).

The following is Stacey Klein's experience being raised in Modern Orthodoxy Judaism:

A: Can you describe the community you are from?

S: Modern Orthodox, so, let's see, within Judaism, there are a number of denominations. There's Orthodoxy or the Orthodox movement, the conservative movement and there's the reform movement. Those are the three main branches of Judaism, denominations within Judaism. And then there are other things like reconstruction, like the Christians, all these other things. So Orthodoxy, itself, is an umbrella for many different things. So there's ultra Orthodoxy and then there's modern Orthodox, which is, we are integrated in the world. We go to the movies. We maybe grew up, like are moms are not as concerned with the laws of modesty like they don't wear wigs or cover their hair. Is that familiar?

A: Yeah, It is. But I didn't know that Modern Orthodox didn't cover their hair with the wig. I thought that that was still a part of even a modern Orthodox faith.

S: Okay. So there are gradations. So that's probably more detail than you want but there are gradations. Gradations like I'm modern orthodox, I'm centrist



orthodox...you know, people get into all these names. I'm postmodern but modern orthodox typically.

The community I grew up in was called Modern Orthodox and even now, modern is typically like, we go to Jewish day schools, we are really insulated in a lot of ways, we are with our own people and we go to sleep away camp with our own people. There's nobody from other races really unless they became orthodox Jewish. So, white and pretty much upper middle-class Jewish and we all keep the Sabbath, you know, which is to observe the laws of the Sabbath, we keep a Kosher home, typically, and we all go to the same schools and we kind of all think alike and look alike and...you know...that kind of thing that conformity. We follow Jewish law, pretty much.

A: So that is the community you were raised in? And were your parents also raised in that similar kind of community?

S: Yeah, I mean, my parent's parents, my mom's parents were holocaust survivors so they were from Europe. They were religious and observant, that kind of orthodox, maybe a little to the right of that and then it just stayed that way. She went to Yeshiva, which is a Jewish day school where you learn Hebrew subjects and English. My dad too, also Orthodox. You have a Bar Mitzvah...I mean, everybody has Bar Mitzvahs. That doesn't have to be part of orthodoxy that can be conservative or reform. So, there are various degrees. You would go to an orthodox wedding or an orthodox Bar Mitzvah, it would be different just a conservative one. Because the orthodox are very, very particular about following Jewish law and sticking to it and so they are more rigid, or more adherent, precision really matters as far as how you keep the laws. They are not so flexible. Modern Orthodoxy tries to say they are a little more flexible. They can have couples hang out together on New Year's Eve and you don't have to separate the sexes or...but they definitely think they are right, which trickled down into my attitudes.

A: So what are the expectations of your parents based from this religion? How do you make decisions for your life? For example, do they expect you to marry only a Jewish person?

S: Right. Yeah. That's a good question. Okay, so, you're getting me at an age where, I'm very separated from my parents. I'm also a psychotherapist and I've done a lot of personal work. So I've broken away from my community in ways that most of my friends have not, and maybe never will. Just because, I've been really interested in that and being free. I would say none of those things fit anymore, for me or my brother, who is also not really connected. We're both really spiritual but we're not orthodox in that way anymore. So what was expected was...so from the religious standpoint it's expected that you remain in orthodox. That you continue to follow the laws, that you keep a kosher home, that you, also...you generally eat, when you eat outside that home, you also eat kosher. That you, let's say for my brother, that he wears a Yakama, you know?

A: Oh yeah.

S: These have been issues over the years, like when we started breaking away from my parent's traditions there was a lot of flack. And there would be, my mother would be like, why are you not wearing a Yakama, you are outside with me and we are walking around and people can see you. And that's the whole community thing too, it's not like he's breaking a law by not wearing a Yakama because it's not written in scripture that you have to wear one, but it's the custom and the custom has become almost gospel because that's how the community lives. Does that make sense?

A: Absolutely...It's a culture.

S: It probably makes a lot of sense to you.

A: So much sense.

S: So within Judaism, it's very intellectual and very rich and you could study the laws in a lot of depth, it's very interesting. But there are all these categories, like this is a custom and this is a law but then if it's a custom and everyone is doing it then it kind of becomes like a law. The laws are very confusing to people and people have a lot guilt about not following things. And they don't always know what the guilt is even about. I know what it's about because I studied the laws and I'm like...is that a law or is that a custom. But most people don't know and think this is bad, I'm just bad. I shouldn't do this.

A: Oh yeah. I get that

S: You know that...

A: Yeah, I do. How do your parents reconcile your life with the religion? Are they still orthodox?

S: They are still orthodox. So as far as the expectations...the expectations were that people get married, you're supposed to get married soon. I mean there is not exactly an age and its changed with the times but most people get married by the time you're in your late twenties. If not, peopled are getting worried and then there is judgment and there's a lot of, what's going on? Is she gay? Is she crazy? Does she have commitment issues, you know...(laughing). And then you start to join the rest of the world but by the time you're in your thirties, everyone's freaking out. Not just the Jews, but at this point, to be forty-five and not married, it's insane and unheard of, you know. There are still many singles, you know, in the modern orthodox community. But I would say, that many have not stayed religious because, and when I say religious I mean orthodox, you know, many have not stayed that way because its also a religion that's very focused on

community and family. So if you don't have a partner you don't want to risk the shame of everyone judging you that you're not religious but you also feel lonely because you have to do Sabbath alone. Maybe you don't have that many friends to do it with anymore, you're not part of a family so the rituals have less meaning. Make sense?

A: Sure! Absolutely.

S: Okay, so you're supposed to be married, you're really supposed to keep within the religion and keep all the laws, they want you to marry a Jew, particularly an orthodox Jew but as you get older and you're single for a while, they reduce, lower their expectation, (laughing) all right fine...and we have jokes like, if I bring home a zebra, my mother would be like, 'it's fine!! They will just convert! You know, it's fine! Anything in pants!' At this point anything will work because they just want grandchildren, they want you to perpetuate the Jews. There's the whole thing about the Holocaust happening and how we have to reproduce so that we have more Jews in the world, it's sad, to make up for it and whatever. Most orthodox parents are pretty disappointed if you're not married. I recently saw my mom and I outed myself saying, I don't eat kosher. And she was like, 'you don't eat kosher?' Especially when you give up eating kosher meat, that's a big deal. Some people eat fish and some people eat cheese out but not meat because that's a big thing. So she was just very devastated about that. Other things, I mean the marriage thing is very hard. My mother lives in Israel in Jerusalem where religion is very important. And so it's very embarrassing to her to have children that are not married and she doesn't have grandchildren who come to see her that she can talk about. So that's all layers of things like that. My parents are divorced so it's a little different.

A: Yeah

S: So they are disappointed, they're just disappointed in themselves and, you know, all that shame. And for her, and for me, I think community is about conformity. A lot of it is about conformity. There is a lot of other stuff that's wonderful about community but it's at a cost I think often. So...

A: You mentioned divorce, is that allowed in orthodox?

S: It's allowed. And I would say, my parents got divorced like twenty something years ago? So at the time it was fewer but people were getting divorced.

A: That was pretty brave of your mom then, to do that. Twenty years ago! That's pretty brave.

S: Yeah. I can't say...it wasn't like it didn't happen. It happened. But now it's much more, I think she was like the leader, like after that a lot of people got divorced...(laughing). But it was brave. And there is also a lot of problems with,

this is a whole other area, but because Jewish law hasn't evolved at the pace of society, because they are so afraid to change it, they want to preserve things; Jewish divorce is a whole other issue. Because, there...I don't know if you want to go into that but there's a whole thing about religious divorce and legal divorce and you have to follow the Jewish laws and they're not always very kind to woman because it hasn't caught up.

A: It's the same in Mormonism too. It's legal and it has to happen but there's a whole religious rite to it and since you mentioned the women, can you share with me what the different rules are in orthodox between the expectation of women and the roles of women or how you see the role of women in the faith or orthodox.

S: Okay. It's a good question. I would say that it's changed over the years. Like right now women are living in a really kind of exciting time, I mean I still think the community is way behind the rest of the world and that just gets on my nerves, I'm like, come on already and liberate women, it's ridiculous. Orthodoxy is so rigid and now you're calling it open and rigid? But the open orthodox are a segment of people that have begun to ordain women and it's very delicate and everyone's yelling and there is a lot of backlash. But they have created a school where they're ordaining women and they are saying women can potentially be rabbis. So that's a big deal. That's come a long way. That's taken them forever. They still have these laws that they have not been able to fix, so when my parents got divorced, my father was angry and he was able to withhold the religious divorce from my mother because the laws were in his favor. And the fact that those laws have still not changed...they went on for about four or five years and my mother was considered a chained woman, chained to the husband. That's insane. I had said to her at the time, 'if you are really upset about it fuck orthodoxy, just go be conservative.' She's like, 'you can't do that!' And I was like, but they are oppressing you. So, that's still there. And there are people fighting for it and there are more organizations trying to help women and things have come along, but there's still that. It's still not easy for a woman to get free from her husband in that way, so that's not great for women.

A: What were the roles of women twenty years ago versus what are the roles now? Is it more progressive now? Are women expected to stay at home and take care of the children? In a day-to-day living situation, what does it look like in an orthodox home between a man and a woman and their roles?

S: There's a lot of variety. When I was orthodox and dating orthodox men and I had actually gotten more religious than my parents. I was always very spiritual so I went one direction more intense and then I left. At the time, I was dating a rabbi who was very liberal, a lot of them were liberal and they did want the woman to be raising the kids, you know, they'd be involved, I'd say the man would be the rabbi and the woman could help or the woman could, you know, host meals at her home on the Sabbath. Maybe she could teach classes in the synagogue and know

some Torah so he was pretty open-minded but I think there is still a little bit of a misogyny like a patriarchal view that's definitely still part of the religion. As far as roles, the women, we were encouraged to have a career. I became a social worker by choice. My parents wanted me to go to medical school. So the Jews are really into education, we are obsessed with it, so that was pretty much emphasized. There wasn't anything I wasn't allowed to do. There wasn't anything that that's not nice for a woman to do. I would say that was pretty liberal.

A: What about morality, sexual morality for women and men? Is there a difference in that? Is it a very strict rule?

S: I'm trying to think. It's hard to separate some of that from your parents and what they were like and their views on sexuality cause it was kind of individual. Most of my friends, the way we grew up, sex was like, in the modern orthodox world, everyone was a little delayed. We were not really as fast as the rest of the world. That may have contributed to...but I'm always struck when I read about Mormonism or it's never, somehow it feels...the Jews don't have beliefs about sex as sinful. So that's a good thing. They don't put that on it. But they do believe that premarital sex is not such a good thing. You shouldn't be doing that. So there is definitely some delay of that. Like in high school we didn't wear a lot of low cut things but we did wear short sleeves and we just did things later. I remember there were kids from Manhattan who were a little less religious than us and they were having sex before marriage and a lot of us were like, I don't know if that's nice, I mean it was more prudish. And our parents...I don't know. They didn't really say anything but I think it was like, just go slower...more that.

A: So there was no shame, no shame of your body? Women aren't supposed to be dressed modestly? It just kind of like a...slowing down?

S: There is that, its there too. I'm trying to think of to what degree. Okay, so the body, the body is not really encouraged. It's not that it's like, don't have one, but there's so much of the head, there's so much about thinking and academics and there is also definitely an underlining...like the schools...so they sent us to schools where the teachers were wearing wigs. So the teachers were more religious and they were modest. In first grade I came home and I was like, ma, you need to be wearing a wig. And she was like, 'what? (laughing) Don't tell me what to do.' And I was like, well Mrs. Rothschild wears a wig and that is right, so a lot of that goes on too. And you kind of get mixed messages because within the text there are things that say women should really cover their elbows. But we were wearing sleeves here (upper arms) You know, women should not really wear too much low cut stuff, you don't want to be too out there. There was definitely a modesty emphasis and I think they would try to explain it like the woman is holy but you sometimes got the impression that a lot of the laws were like for women to cover up so men wouldn't sin. And that was obnoxious.

A: Yes.

S: And you felt it because there was a girl in our synagogue who had really, she was like very well endowed, she would walk around, and we were like, that's a little slutty. So there was definitely an undercurrent that you couldn't be that out there. You have to have some modicum of modesty and, those people are having sex already, 'that's a little sleazy.' So there was definitely a lot of prudishness and stuff that filtered down from probably Europe or the old days from where things were stricter. And having sex before marriage was definitely something that people did but...because I became more religious, I took on more restriction and that made me more uncomfortable about my body. So it's a little hard to say. I would say that there are definitely women who are somewhat more comfortable with their bodies, most though are going to be prudish about sex.

A: Okay

S: So I'll say this, a lot of the way its set up is that you suppress, you sort of fall out of touch with what you biologically might want, like your desires, because you're told that you should wait. It's not nice. It's probably nicer to have sex within marriage. So what happens is you sometimes cut off from your organic desires in favor of the religion. Which I think is probably true in other places.

A: Oh yeah.

S: I would not be able to have a boyfriend; they wouldn't stop me, I could have had sex, people were fooling around, but it just seems more permissive in other religions than in ours in that way.

A: Thank you. So I want to switch over to talk about how you first learned about mindfulness meditation?

S: Okay, it's interesting because what you described about your story is very different from mine. I left the religion first and then I probably discovered more of meditation. The reason I started to leave was because, one, I was single and feeling like a lack of community and also feeling a lack of not fitting in as a single woman, in the rituals and in the community, of having family and all that but also I started to become a social worker and a therapist and I didn't relate to people's very rigid and judgmental attitudes about the outside world. And I was studying Gestalt therapy and it was very forgiving and accepting and it was a lot about, what do I sense in my body and what do I feel. And a lot of religion was about what's the right thing to do. Right, so it was a lot about what you should do and what the community wants. And Gestalt was very much about mindfulness, rooted in mindfulness. Probably even more than the mindfulness movement, it's really very close to Buddhism. So I started to sense that people had judgments and people were not really feeling each other, they were more judging each other. And so that's when I started to feel like...I remember going on a date, or I was at a Sabbath meal and someone was like, you work with heroin addicts? They are

crazy! That's gross! And I was like, that's so mean. And so when I started to feel this exclusion, and this lack of sensing other people I, or feeling other people, or just judging them and evaluating them, I realized I live in a differently, I don't want to be like this. I wanted to date men who were passionate, who were open-minded. That was probably the beginning of it. Meditation really came later. But so mindfulness was part of my training, it was probably in my late twenties, thirties it was really about, if we are really going to the depths of mindfulness, it was really about awareness. I was in therapy and I was in psychoanalytic therapy but that wasn't as helpful as Gestalt because Gestalt was about sensing yourself in the moment, being in the here and now. So, does this make sense to you?

A: Absolutely, Yeah! What kind of level of participation in your religion did you have during the time when you started the mindfulness with the Gestalt training?

S: I was still orthodox. So I was orthodox and part of a synagogue. I had a roommate was religious. But I was starting to feel a disconnect with people because you're supposed to keep the Sabbath, you're supposed to maybe not have sex, but I'm thirty and I'm kind of like, I need, I want to be with someone and I'm having these urges, and I was like, is it okay? Do I have permission? I was searching books and trying to ask rabbis, do I have permission at some age to just break the laws if I can't take it anymore? I was learning to value more my feelings and not what people told me, or whatnot, and also I started to question my theology cause it was like, how does God create people with feelings and then tell them to suppress them. This doesn't make sense.

And eventually I just took more and more steps like, okay, there's a conference on the Sabbath and normally we don't drive, we don't turn on lights. You could walk to the conference 80 blocks if you want to but that was kind of ridiculous so I remember making my first decision, like, I feel like I'll be enriched by this conference. It's helping me become a better person. I think I'm going to prioritize that over whether Gods going to be mad if I do this. Or whether my community will judge me, all these things. And so that was the beginning of that path. And I would say, I started dating men who weren't religious, then I started having sex at some point, I was like, okay I just can't do this. And then what happened... I felt a calling towards meditation. So I would say meditation came later.

A: Okay

S: But mindfulness was really going on for five years before that.

A: And so describe your meditation, your early meditation to what now is your current practice.

S: Okay, so...Meditation...so I got interested in meditation, I just felt this calling to it, I went to a synagogue that was, where the rabbi had been orthodox and left and it was a massive movement. So he incorporated it into the prayer service,

so...how did I start? I don't even know. It might have just been a couple times a week. Maybe I'd read a Buddhist book, I started going to Dharma talks at a Buddhist place in the city. And, so I'd meditate there maybe half an hour, once a week. And then I started to implement it five or ten minutes a day. Didn't always keep to it everyday but I enjoyed it so I started doing more and more of it. And then I started to really like the philosophy of it so I got interested in it. I started going to meditation retreats like in IMS and now I'd say...where am I now? So now I meditate almost every, I'm trying to do it every day daily. I can do it for 30 minutes, sometimes 40 minutes, it depends. My goal is to do it twice a day but it rarely happens. But I know that it's helpful. And I'm just like very much a Buddhist, a Hindu, a universal spiritual person. All of the religions are, all of the philosophies are really part of my way of thinking. And I see them as very similar saying the same thing...one God. That's just how I see it.

A: Yeah

S: And...what else do I say about it? About my practice now...like I asked Jack Kornfield to be my teacher, I need a teacher, he said no... (laughing)

S: He's so busy. But whatever, I tried a couple of times. I have a spiritual mentor now that I've been connecting with in New York. I don't know what he is exactly but yeah, so like, I'm very spiritual. I say spiritual, mindfulness is really my life. And how I practice as a therapist is I run workshops on it and I teach people about somatic mindfulness, like the body. I don't know if I'd call it somatic mindfulness, but my work is focused on somatic, you know noticing your body in the moment.

A: So that's how you ground yourself, that's your connection.

S: Yes! That's really, really like my home, that's what I feel. When I'm feeling lost in the world, I come back to my meditation practice or I come back to feeling the earth and nature and that's how I get grounded.

A: Excellent. So do you feel like you came from this orthodox background and then went even further than your parents but you feel whole, just talking to you and then after talking to other women, you feel whole and healthy and I don't feel any kind of anger or sadness. Do you feel like mindfulness contributed to that kind of reconciliation of your past? Where you are now, as far as not being in your community of origin?

S: That's good. It's making me think. You know it's funny because I guess I don't think of, like when you say mindfulness, I see so many different possibilities, like it's become a movement, I see mindfulness as our best state, you know, like it connects us with our heart and it connects us to our liveliness and that's part of my Gestalt therapy background and feeling embodied in the world, feeling at one with things but really bringing moment to moment aware of myself and aware of



others. And so that's kind of how I see mindfulness, not so much like the mindfulness movement but just a practice where I can, where I trust myself and I really tune in, yeah?

A: Yeah, I love that.

S: Right and so. And that was part of my awakening or shifting and realizing it's not about all the dogma, it's about doing that dogma that makes sense to me; how does it resonate for me.

A: Yeah! You mentioned therapy and kind of having to work through a separation of that...Do you think mindfulness or your meditation contributed to your wholeness? I think if you're raised in a very strong dogma, or conservative religion of any kind, it takes a really long time to get to that place where you trust yourself and I guess what I'm asking, did that come from your experience, did it come from therapy, or did any of it come from mindfulness or meditation?

S: So I guess what's worked for me is, separating all of those things, cause I think in many ways I brought them all together like I'm in an integrated place now which feels good. I don't see my, when you talk about mindfulness, I guess I see my psychotherapy and my meditation practice as really as contributing to my wholeness. I also see those two paths as being really essential, both had to happen. They don't do so well on their own, either one. That's my opinion. But, so, if I think, when I say mindfulness I think of all of that, like every practice of opening my heart, sitting with myself. So mindfulness to me is also much more about really sensing myself in my life. Meditation has been complicated because meditation can also shut you off. Because meditation is like, keep going, okay, you notice that but allow that thought and keep going, come back to the breath, so there was also repression or suppression that can happen in meditation if you're not doing Vipassana, you're not going into the experiences.

S: I would say though, meditation contributed to my wholeness, yeah; as far as helping me know there was something beyond psychology in a way. Like psychology, therapy was very much about self but it was very comforting and very, this is an important piece, very nurturing to feel like there was a God that loved me, not that hated me...

A: Oh yeah! That's beautiful.

S: And that was a big piece of orthodoxy that there was a God that actually would value my trusting myself rather than would want me to betray myself for the religion.

A: Yes! I love that.

S: So, that comes up still. When you are wired that way; if I pick up an orthodox book or a book by a scholarly rabbi, I'm interested in the mysticism of Judaism, kabbalah, so when I read those things, I can fall into the fear state again. And my journey has been about fear versus love, and so, I can fall into reading a book, and like, I'm a bad girl. (laughing) And then I'm like wait a minute, what just happened, I just picked up a book...so then I use my mindfulness, which is like, what just happened...I was feeling okay, I picked up this rabbi's book and I'm feeling like shit, okay, wow...this is really loaded with a lot of fear. And so I can feel that dynamic come back, it doesn't go away but then I find a way to work with it by going back to mindfulness or finding a neutrality, finding the heart rather than all this thinking. Yeah?

A: Oh yeah! Well honestly, you can see. You know, people who are still in that they don't see women as being oppressed, they don't see the fear, they don't see any of that...they just are in it, and they are living it and there's no separation.

A: I have two more questions, what has mindfulness done for your life besides take you into a healthier place where religion is concerned, fear versus love, what about career, I know it's probably everything in your career.

S: It's everything. So as we are talking I'm realizing, that honestly, you know, they always used to say, Judaism is a way of life not just a religion and it made sense because Judaism was everything. It's like, you go to the bathroom, you say a blessing. You know it wasn't like you just go to church and that's it, it was really woven in and it's still very much a part of me, mindfulness has become that way for me. It's never apart from me. And it's just how I live; it's just like a vibration I live on. You know, so it's changed everything in my life. It's changed dating. I was dating someone and just really sensing. And I can go into my orthodox way of thinking or my old disconnected way of thinking or just being divorced in my head, like, do I like him, does he like me...I don't know. I mean I could do all the obsessing and then I can come back to, what am I feeling, what am I feeling. And do I want to see this person again. Am I drawn to him, or am I not. I do that with clients, and I teach people how to feel themselves and then I know. And there is more of a knowing. With career, I mean, it is my career because I'm a therapist and I'm teaching a little more and I'm writing. So these things are really part of my career.

It's always nurturing and nourishing. But it's also brought me back to God and spirituality. So there was a point, a lot of people leave religion and their like, done. For me, like I left but I've been to IMS, I've been to the Barre Center for Buddhist studies and sometimes I've felt like, where's the mysticism. Where's the warmth? And that brought me back but I had to find my own new relationship with Judaism rather than, you know, the old punitive way.

A: Yes. How has that influenced you in how you feel women, do you feel like any kind of need to...

S: Empower women? Yeah. Another area. I'm trying to put it into words. Definitely. Definitely in my practice when I work with women it's more about, well, what do you feel, what do you feel, you know, so I'm definitely aware of manipulation by men. Ways that I've been involved a little bit...like, I've published some articles in Jewish newspapers about sexual abuse because I actually was molested by a grandfather one time. But it wasn't, it wasn't a major trauma, I mean it was a trauma but it wasn't like a life defining thing. But it was something that, I don't know that I saw that so much as abuse against women, I just saw it like the men in our community were like doing a lot of work to not, there's just a lack of appreciation of the feminine. Yeah. And the feminine voice and valuing what the feminine brings to religion, brings to life.

A: Yes.

S: So I think, I do a lot with women where I talk about, I'm informed by Chinese medicine or just women are water element or the mystical aspect of women whether it's in, you know, women's intuition or Native American traditions like just really respecting the wisdom of the woman. And what we offered to the world. I don't offer workshops on that per say, but I'm definitely passionate about helping women. And trying to bring that voice, I feel like that voice has been missing in my religion where I grew up.

A: Okay. Great. Anything else you want to add about your experience? In religion or meditation? Or anything you want to tell me?

S: I'm trying to think. It's a lot right? It's good! It's getting me to think about it, it's putting it all together. I don't know. There will probably stuff that comes up afterwards. I can't think of anything else. I'm giving you the synopsis of where I am now, but there has definitely been a lot of pain and there's been a lot of my own journey when I first started wearing more revealing clothing or things like that I had to really struggle with that, is that okay, is God mad are people going to judge me. There was a lot of learning about my body and accepting it...

S: And also a lot of sadness about when you leave a community there's loss, there's a lot of loss of that sense of belonging and I don't really have a community now. I haven't found a dharma community, like a Sangha that I really like in New York. I haven't found Jews that I really love to connect with. So I have a more solitary existence and I don't love that. I miss the sense of comradery. It's lonely to be this truthful person without all those people. And I also don't want to go back. But it's such a dance of like...

A: it is...I absolutely understand. Yeah

S: It makes sense right? You, like you miss it. People talk about that.

A: Yeah

S: So...like you don't just get away from it, it's a part of you. I also have, one last thing, I have patients, a lot of the patients who come see me, I have some fundamentalist Christians who come and they are like, oh you have a Jewish background and you sounded really excepting, and then I work with them on helping them create a new relationship to their religion if they want that. But it's mostly about, how can I help you trust yourself, rather than, trust what other people tell you about yourself.

A: Right.

S: That's been important, yeah.

A: I couldn't agree more. Yeah that's what mindfulness... that's been my journey, learning how to trust myself. I'd say if I had to just sum it up in one sentence, that's the most important thing and for me it was really...sitting in the silence...that help me come to mindfulness. That was just my experience. And...

S: Just sitting in meditation?

A: Yeah...creating that space to, not necessarily believe...

S: So like the distance from what you were told or what...

A: From the Dogma...yeah.

S: No, that makes a lot of sense. People are just in it. We are so up close that we can't see what we do.

A: There's not truth in that because you're just being told, like you said...over and over again...you're just being told and it's, how are you feeling...it's not, it's too scary how you're feeling, you know, so...

S: ...create the space

A: Yes!

S: That's huge. Well I have to run but that was so interesting to connect with you. I really enjoyed this.

A: I did too. Thank you so much! I really appreciate it.

S: Really nice to connect with you (S. Klein, personal communication, November 13, 2015).

## **Analysis**

The reviewing and analyzing of the text of interviews led me to many expected conclusions but also a few unexpected discoveries and questions. The following analysis will begin with the similarities in experience of each woman which include knowledge of self or self-awareness, perceived knowledge of sexism within each religion, understanding of patriarchy, and the common outcome of leaving or not participating in the church of their origin. I will also describe the differences in meditation practices and styles, coming to meditation and its part in healing from the perceived harm of their religion, as well as involvement with activism. Included is a newly emerging question for further research and contemplation. In conclusion, I will make key points that have opened my experience and knowledge in the context of phenomenology methodology or the way the human experience is observed to make continuous meaning.

### **Knowledge of Self**

Throughout this process of finding mindfulness meditation, I have often asked the question, what does it really mean to have knowledge of self. Jon Kabat-Zinn tells a humorous story of one of his teachers who came from Vietnam. This teacher would asked himself, with a very thick accent, “Who am I?” and then answer his own question by saying, “I don’t know” (A Day of Mindfulness Practice and Dialogue with Jon Kabat-Zinn, Lesley, October 2015). The Buddha has often been quoted as saying, “You are what you think. All that you are arises from your thoughts. With your thoughts you make your world” (The Dhammapada). This quote provokes questions on how thoughts contribute to self-awareness. I would venture to say that just being present within those thoughts brings you to yourself more than any other exercise or practice.

A Buddha is not a man of concentration, he is a man of awareness. He has not been trying to narrow down his consciousness; on the contrary, he has been trying to drop all barriers so that he becomes totally available to existence. Watch... existence is simultaneous. I am speaking here and the traffic noise is simultaneous. The train, the birds the wind blowing through the trees -- in this moment the whole of existence converges. You listening to me, I speaking to you, and millions of things going on -- it is tremendously rich (Osho, Chapter 3).

I would also propose that obtaining self-awareness for each woman interviewed, while practicing these religions, was a feat. As previously described, rules and theology conflicted with each of these women's own internal guides. Within these conservative, religious cultures, each woman had to overcome the perceived 'right' or 'wrong' thought coming from strict dogmas and ideology while also resisting against the authority of men and male leadership. Awareness as described by Jiddu Krishnamurti is:

Awareness is observation without choice, condemnation, or justification.

Awareness is silent observation from which there arises understanding without the experiencer and the experienced. In this awareness, which is passive, the problem or the cause is given an opportunity to unfold itself and so give its full significance. In awareness there is no end in view to be gained, and there is no becoming, the 'me' and the 'mine' not being given the continuity (1948).

In my experience, self-knowledge comes from observing what is. Historically, much of the time, actual truth within religion has been an oxymoron. The movie, *Spotlight*, meticulously portrays the cover up of the Boston diocese in the Catholic Church of the many child-abuse cases and crimes of priests. Mormons call it 'lying for the Lord' or

perhaps more audaciously stating that many people need ‘milk before the meat,’ justifying the absence of, or not expounding on, true historical details. According to Joseph Smith, he received ‘revelation’ verifying this philosophy and giving it God’s stamp of approval (Doctrine & Covenants 19:22).

The primary form of control of thinking was fear-based with threats of salvation and/or righteousness. These women were very clear about how they rose above the fears caused by this limited way of thinking by practicing mindfulness meditation. Desiree shared this experience in the interview regarding her process in becoming more self-aware:

One, it gave me a spiritual place. An anchor. Because when I learned to quiet myself to be in the moment, I stopped running away from so many emotions and working through them. Those were a big deal. I remember, I remember one of my meditations, I still to this day, in class, we had to do all this meditations as part of the homework and I remember just sobbing one night, and I was all alone and I had really never dealt with loneliness for the first time in my life. And I had a bit of a panic attack in it. And I made it through. And I remember making it through, look, you’re okay. It’s okay. You’re not alone. You’re your best friend. I learned to be my best friend instead of needing other people to fulfill that for me, you know?

She spoke of dealing with and knowing her fears saying, “Dealt with my fears...really tough on my fears. Looked them in the eye.”

Tatiana described her awareness in this way, “I’d been away! And I’d been hiding and finally after all that time with myself and feeling that peace with myself and accepting...I could see, I could see what had happened to me and what wasn’t. I didn’t need to let it be there anymore.” She described how increased meditation also increased mindfulness and the result as stated by her, “...I feel like I’m more me and I’m not a tree that’s getting blown around all over the place. I feel stable in my life. Like other stuff is happening and it affects me and I respond...but I’m not getting knocked down.”

Stacey also experienced a more heightened awareness of self and noticed that religion, as it did for the other women, played the role of making her feel a need for approval by those in authority, as well as the need to be seen as satisfactorily ‘righteous enough.’ She started seeing this in her life and expressed it this way:

I was studying Gestalt therapy and it was very forgiving and accepting and it was a lot about, what do I sense in my body and what do I feel. And a lot of religion was about what’s the right thing to do. Right, so it was a lot about what you should do and what the community wants. So I started to sense that people had judgments and people were not really feeling each other, they were more judging each other.

She revealed feeling that years of indoctrination caused her to be “wired that way” after spending that time within the culture of her religion. She shared the story of picking up religious books and reading them saying, “I can fall into the fear state again. And my journey has been about fear versus love.” She continued later in the interview by describing, “I see mindfulness as our best state, you know, like it connects us with our heart and it connects us to our liveliness...I see mindfulness, not so much like the mindfulness movement but just a practice where I can, where I trust myself and really tune in, yeah?” She then added:

...meditation, mindfulness practice really contributes to my wholeness. I also see those two paths as being really essential, both had to happen. They don’t do so well on their own. Either one. That’s my opinion. But so, if I think, when I say mindfulness I think of all of that...opening my heart, sitting with myself. So mindfulness to me is also much more about really sensing myself in my life.

A universal aversion that all three women had to conquer, to become more self-aware, seems to have been this fear. Each mentions coming to trust themselves after some time meditating and using mindfulness in their lives. In fact, Tatiana mentions this in three separate statements during the course of her interview. After conquering fear, they were able to see their way more fully into their own feelings and ways of being.



## **Knowledge of Sexism**

In discussing sexism, which occurred in each of these women's experience, it is important to define what is meant by this term in the context of conservative religion. The answer is varied and too big to define in this thesis. For the purposes of examining the content of these interviews and other ideas regarding sexism here, I will use the definition below:

Sexism is any act, attitude, or institutional configuration that systematically subordinates or devalues women. Built upon the belief that men and women are constitutionally different, sexism takes these differences as indications that men are inherently superior to women, which then is used to justify the nearly universal dominance of men in social and familial relationships, as well as politics, religion, language, law, and economics (Mumm, 2007).

Sexism, based on this definition, applies to these interviews but also describes the dogmatic, conservative, religious culture as a whole. There has been a system of leaving women out of the hierarchy in church leadership in many sects of organized religions. Sexism in religion could be an entire thesis of its own so it is only appropriate to briefly state this, which has historically been true. I will give, however, an example of how one feminist described his feelings of the 'Adam and Eve' story, which is the beginning theology of many faiths including Judaism and Christianity. Muslims also revere Adam as the father of all 'mankind' and Eve as his wife and mother of all 'mankind.' It does not seem to be a stretch that this story would contribute to the culture of how women and men are viewed and seen in many of these religious communities. Jake Brannen states:

The Adam and Eve story is an extremely influential document in human history

that sets up the social relationship between men and women. Unfortunately, this was done in such a way as to propagate the notion of female inferiority that has since had a major religious, political, and social impact on the status of women throughout history and in the modern present (Brannen, 2013).

He references different issues in his article such as Eve being made from the rib of Adam. Since she was the first to sin, she “brought death to all mankind” and had the consequence of painful childbirth and a lower status as “helpmate” to her husband (Brannen, 2013).

Given the above definition of sexism and understanding the overall cultural teaching of this in all three of these conservative religions, the women all became aware of this culture of sexism in their lives after they experienced more presence of mind through their mindfulness meditation practices.

Desiree described the culture of her religion was to “hug from the side.” She said, “I remember the ballet world, coming to Boston everyone was all touchy feely...I remember hugging guys from the front and being like, is that okay?” She referenced the role of women in her church in these words, “...at the time we had two miscarriages; that was a big deal looking back now. It was so devastating at the time because my goal and role in my mind was, be a woman...and have children. And I felt that in my culture.” She continued to speak of the miscarriages as a fearful experience in regards to her role as a woman and her belief that if she was unable to have children she wasn’t “being a good enough Christian.” As she became more mindful, she struggled with many perceived cultural definitions of being a woman in this environment, such as being a “humble

person” because that is what women were supposed to be. After much meditation practice she came to believe that “women are very suppressed in the church, so much.”

Tatiana described her experience, through becoming more mindful, as looking back and knowing that girls, in particular, needed to be “good.” Her desire was to study neurology and the different ways of brain functioning, as well as, spheres of spirituality in the same realm. But as she went through adolescence she was encouraged to give up any of those career dreams in favor of what would make the woman’s role in the church, being homemaker and mother, easier.

She gave up the study of science to pursue elementary education, which she was not interested in. Eventually she gave up her dream of career all together, married and became a mother without a degree. She referenced the disappointment of this many times during the interview and described herself as feeling this “nothingness” of value. As she explored mindfulness meditation, she was able to pinpoint this as a very harmful part of the culture of her church, engrained in sexism, which contributed to her decision-making. She says, “I didn’t like the rules of it...the Church presence that overlapped into my life...I felt like that oppression was always there.” She described her feelings of sexism like this:

I think the strongest influence came pretty early on young. You see what men do and what women don’t do. And the polygamy thing for me overlays everything in that comes back to the doctrine of what is a woman and what’s a woman’s role and place because of her gender, right? Because of her parts...this is what she has to do...a woman is to be given and taken and she’s, she’s property really. She’s just an extra crown for a man and for me that was really painful. This is what women were and this is what they were supposed to do and it crushed me that that is all I would be worth as a woman. But I couldn’t fight it so I carried it as kind of a private, shameful, I don’t know, it really felt like I was branded. I was property and I had to do this...If a woman doesn’t accept it, she will be destroyed anyway. So she has no choices and no power she just... somebody else’s happiness. It’s all

about the man. And I lived that way. Sacrificed my dreams and what path of life I wanted.

Stacey was also able to identify the sexist culture of Modern Orthodoxy after having used mindfulness meditation in her life. She said, “I still think the community is way behind the rest of the world and that just gets on my nerves. I’m like, come on already and liberate women, it’s ridiculous. Orthodoxy is so rigid and now you’re calling it open and rigid?” Although she recognized this, she also felt as if there is movement in her community for women to gain more liberation and access to important religious roles. She continued, “...The open Orthodox are a segment of people that have begun to ordain women and it’s very delicate and everyone’s yelling and there is a lot of backlash. But they have created a school where they’re ordaining women and they are saying women can potentially be rabbis. So that’s a big deal. That’s come a long way. That’s taken them forever.” She speaks about the sexuality of women and body when she spoke of her knowledge of sexism in her community.

Okay, so the body, the body is not really encouraged...so they sent us to schools where the teachers were wearing wigs. So the teachers were more religious and they were modest. In first grade I came home and I was like, ma, you need to be wearing a wig. And she was like, ‘what? (laughing) Don’t tell me what to do.’ And I was like, well Mrs. Rothschild wears a wig and that is the right way. You know, women should not really wear too much low cut stuff, you don’t want to be too out there. There was definitely a modesty emphasis and I think they would try to explain it like the woman is holy but you sometimes got the impression that a lot of the laws were like that for women to cover up so men wouldn’t sin. And that was obnoxious.

All three women mentioned that sexuality is controlled in these religious communities.

Often times this seems to have been a mechanism to control women and their sexuality by having different standards for women than men. This oppressive behavior was evident

to all three women as they became more aware through their individual mindfulness practices.

### **Understanding Patriarchy within these Religions**

I would surmise that sexism and patriarchy go hand in hand. However, there are subtle differences that I wanted to highlight because they were uniformly consistent in the interviews of all three women. Their experiences were so similar that I wanted to pull them out separately from amongst the sexist issues.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the London Feminist Network's definition of patriarchy stated here:

Patriarchy is the term used to describe the society in which we live today, characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men whereby women are systematically disadvantaged and oppressed. This takes place across almost every sphere of life but is particularly noticeable in women's under-representation in key state institutions, in decision-making positions and in employment and industry. Male violence against women is also a key feature of patriarchy. Women in minority groups face multiple oppressions in this society, as race, class and sexuality intersect with sexism for example (2016).

This definition is very much like sexism but I want to point to the issue of male dominance that was described in each interview since it was so similar especially in the communities of Mormonism and Modern Orthodox.

Divorce was also an interesting issue that came up in all of the interviews with patriarchy or male leadership having control over this situation. Desiree herself experienced a divorce while practicing her religion and experienced shame due to it.

However, she did not have the same oppressive issues of control from a male authority figure like, in the case of Stacey, whose mother was only able to obtain a religious divorce after her father agreed to it. In the Mormon faith, the highest leadership, all male, must approve a religious divorce for that to be considered final on the records of the church (Bishops hand-book, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

Most interestingly to me were the issues that Tatiana had with polygamy in the historical setting of Mormonism. Men having authority over women, in this case, is justified by patriarchy in the church, using religious manipulation, as in the case of Joseph Smith and also Brigham Young. Both men used religious salvation as an incentive to persuade young women, at least two as young as fourteen, to marry them as part of the practice of 'righteous' plural marriage (Brodie, 1971). Tatiana described her agony with this concept in this description of her experience:

...He could have someone else and it didn't matter what I thought, right, so it took away bit of power from me and so everything was about giving...it always hurt. And I thought I would be clear of that pain, and the anguish of it and I just wasn't. So I got married and it started to plague me, "is my husband going to be with someone else?" And I don't remember if my husband started the comments first or if comments started because I was worried about it but he couldn't say he wouldn't do it...I would have nightmares about him sleeping with other women and I would wake up and my pillow would be wet, literally wet and I would be sobbing. And my husband didn't know what to do with that. But he would make jokes about it...you should think about doing that better because the second wife might do that better. It killed me. But I didn't feel like I could fight it. Because doctrinally I couldn't fight it and say, you are never going to have to do that, you know, don't fantasize about it, it's not happening. But I couldn't carve out any space for myself to feel comfortable. And so, the affect was that I was always competing with ghost wives. I was competing with the people I thought he would love later on. It affected every interaction and it affected everything I did with him. Cause I didn't want to be too negative. I didn't want to complain too much. I wanted to be sure he was very, very happy. Because I wanted to be the favorite, even if I didn't stay the favorite forever.

Although mainstream Mormons no longer practice polygamy, she felt as if she was still living it with phantom women and it was affecting her own authenticity:

I was totally living it. I was living it in the kitchen. I was living it in family budget talks ... I was tormented by it...I couldn't negotiate as an equal partner because I always wanted to be sure he was happy. So...the role of women for now (after practicing mindfulness meditation) in the church, I think they are stuck. I think they are stuck in all of this (patriarchal) teaching. I think they can let a woman say a prayer and pretend like that's a big deal. They can't do much more than that and I think they will probably never be able to move to a healthy place. I think it's a really unhealthy place for women.

Although Stacey's experience seemed less emotionally painful than Tatiana's due to the fact that women are encouraged to be educated in many fields in Modern Orthodoxy, she still described a form of patriarchy in these terms:

They did want the woman to be raising the kids, you know, they'd be involved, I'd say the man would be the rabbi and the woman could help or the woman could, you know, host meals at her home on the Sabbath. Maybe she could teach classes in the synagogue and know some Torah so he was pretty open-minded but I think there is still a little bit of a misogyny like a patriarchal view that's definitely still part of the religion.

### **Participation**

When I started this thesis, I had a firm belief that a woman who was raised in a very conservative religion would not be able to continue to participate fully after she had been practicing mindfulness meditation. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that one cannot hold an oppressive, systematic, and cultural doctrine internally, while also being liberated in the freedom of one's own mind and thoughts through practice. My theory held true in the case of these three women. When asked what their current level of participation was, this is how each responded:

Desiree: "Oh! Nothing! I don't even know if I believe in God. I am questioning that now. My husband is probably an atheist. I always tell him, I can't say I'm

atheist because that feels like I'm turning my back to my family if I say that. Strange? Right?"

Tatiana: "Presently? I do not attend at all. And I'm having my named removed and I am expecting the letter in the mail or actually email because I took care of it that way."

Stacey: "So I've broken away from my community in ways that most of my friends have not, and maybe never will. Just because, I've been really interested in that and being free. I would say none of those things fit anymore, for me..."

Mindfulness Meditation helped to initiate the power of freedom in me. I was unable to stay or go back to participation in a conservative religion after practicing. As Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) states, "Intelligence is the door to freedom and alert attention is the mother of intelligence" (p. 10). Intelligence or 'awareness' and freedom of mind are my perception of why these three women ended participation in their religion of origin.

### **Differences**

There were a few differences that I would note. Not surprisingly, each woman came to her practice differently. I expected there to be differences but assumed that it would be out of crisis or an alertness for need to heal that they would come to a mindfulness meditation practice. This is not the case. Desiree was fully outside of her religious upbringing when she found her practice through her academic studies. As seen above, it did contribute to her healing but not to the extent that I would have thought. She felt like she had always been authentic as a person but the practice helped to heal her fears.

Tatiana had had a long-standing practice that she started well before any of her doubts regarding her religion arose. She had always been curious about how the mind and brain worked. This had been her start in meditation. However, she did say that it helped her to "know" herself in a way that she couldn't have found otherwise.



Stacey started therapy first which helped to heal her from her oppressive thoughts coming from fears regarding religion and community. After many years of therapy and starting her own counseling practice, she found mindfulness meditation and made it a way of life.

Each woman practiced in her own way. Desiree described her practice as more physical, using running, dancing, and walking. Although, she does agree that meditation in stillness is an important part of gaining more mindfulness in day-to-day life. She is more bodily physical in her ways of practice than Tatiana or Stacey. Tatiana is more creative in her process, reading many new-age books and following guided meditations. She detailed one interesting meditation in this way:

I started some sort of visual meditation where I was, kind of like sinking, or diving really, really deep pool, like ocean-deep and I feel these things lift off of me. And, so I rest for a while, you know, at the bottom. I know I have to come back up and life comes back but I can rest for a little while. That's been nourishing to me. It keeps me going.

Stacey's practice is the most familiar to me. She uses insight meditation and practices with a sangha. She participates in workshops, and also engages in silent retreats at the Insight Meditation Society. Trying to 'sit' everyday for 40 minutes helps her and she doesn't believe that she could accomplish mindfulness without this process.

Each woman has taken mindfulness meditation passionately into her areas of work and activism. They are involved in using mindfulness emotionally, intellectually, and physically in each of their chosen careers and dreams of future careers. Mindfulness has been a powerful force in each of their lives. Both Desiree and Stacey use mindfulness meditation as a healing mechanism in their work, Desiree as a life coach and Stacey as a therapist. Tatiana still has dreams of studying the brain and the resulting effects of

meditation. She also uses her practice in her day-to-day life as a career mother; she has used meditation to enhance her own life as well as the lives of her children. Desiree also mentioned this stating: "...I am just trying to put it everywhere in my life, wherever I can...what does that mean? What does that look like? You know?"

"I am just trying to put it everywhere in my life." This statement resonates with my own journey into mindfulness meditation and could likely be agreed upon as a common goal for all three of the women interviewed.

I am most intrigued and surprised that all three women didn't feel that mindfulness meditation was the primary catalyst of healing the grief, loss, and cultural dogmatic thinking when leaving their religious origins. However, despite differences in practice and in the opinion of whether or not mindfulness meditation is the primary contributor of healing, the complete consensus of all is that it has been important enough to "put it everywhere" into a life-long practice of mindfulness meditation.

### **Emerging Questions**

Recently I have been reading the journals of women who were the wives of polygamous Mormon leaders in the mid-eighteen to early nineteen hundreds. It is most fascinating to me when there are two sets of writing from the same woman, for instance, a personal journal and also a talk she would have given in church. There is a striking and vast difference between the two. In the personal journal, it depicts her grief, loneliness, and depression, describing the despair she feels. But the written talk, usually prepared for a church service, is a stiff and proper portrayal of her husband's righteousness and the glory of God, including a testimony of practicing polygamy, which will ultimately deliver them into an exalted heaven.

Where does the discrepancy lie? How does one compartmentalize these different feelings? What behavior does this kind of thinking perpetuate? I assumed it was the result of lack of mindfulness and moment-to-moment present thought. However, as I interviewed these three women, I also found a few similar discrepancies within their experience regarding being authentic personally within their religions. For example, Desiree said, “I have always been a really authentic person.” But then goes on to say how she was living in two different worlds and, “I taught me to quiet down...”

I am interested in following through with a researched examination using phenomenology to address this complex duality in thinking in a religious woman and how the mind perhaps separates reality. Can continued mindfulness meditation solidify thoughts while healing religious disparities? Perhaps healing won't come to those indoctrinated women in plural marriages during the early nineteen hundreds, but healing may be available to the women who bare the legacy of such religious oppression through mindfulness meditation and truth. As the Buddha has often been quoted in saying, “Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.”

### Conclusion

Some years ago I sat in a pew within a church building, with my eyes closed, as my sixteen year old son repeated over and over the words of the ‘sacrament prayer.’ He was nervous. It is expected that the prayer be said with exact verbal precision. He started over and over again until the bishop was satisfied. Then the congregation waited as twelve-year-old boys conducted the rest of this sacrament ritual. Men lead the meeting. I thought nothing of it.

Several years later, this same son returned from serving a proselyting mission at twenty-one. I found myself once again in the same church, different pew, but with a different and seeing mind. I was experiencing it in a whole new and contrasting way, seeing the oppressive culture of sexism in which I had been raised. The pain of truly seeing and feeling was excruciating. It was not the practice of mindfulness meditation that helped me see. That was found within the body. But it was the practice of mindfulness meditation that helped me to be in that moment of pain and loss and see truth and authenticity coming through my mind. This enabled me to find the correct direction of the path that I must always follow.

At a recent, mindfulness workshop led by Sharon Salzberg (The Power of a Loving Heart: Metta or Lovingkindness Meditation, Lesley University, April 24, 2016), Sharon spoke about the practice as something that we must get “used to.” We must find that moment and know that moment. She said many times, “let go and begin again.” This seems to be the secret ingredient to finding liberation in one’s life. Let go and begin again. She also spoke regarding compassion to oneself and used an old Buddhist adage of

“rest your attention lightly like a butterfly on a flower,” and kindly take in this moment, then, let go and begin again.

This thesis is the story of my journey through this Master’s degree program in Mindfulness Studies at Lesley University. I have described what methods of mindfulness meditation I learned through this process, including many of the teachings of Jon Kabat-Zinn, in addition to his neurological experimentation and own Buddhist philosophies. I have used the method of phenomenology to experience a similar, but unique, journey of three different women and their struggle out of conservative, religious organizations and into mindfulness meditation. I have analyzed the similarities of those experiences with the differences and made meaning from these without trying to manipulate the information despite obvious bias.

The experience was highly emotional and crucial to my own pathways to continuing in mindfulness meditation. I am also trying to put mindfulness meditation “everywhere in my life,” as Desiree stated. Religion was a major contributor in my life and in the lives of these three women and in so many others as a catalyst in how we lived and for what we chose. It was the determiner of life decisions and in the efforts of exceedingly *trying* to be something that, in truth, wasn’t. Mindfulness meditation is the act of knowing and being and accepting what is, in this moment. It allows women to just *be* and cast off the oppressive or conditioned thinking of religious culture. Mindfulness meditation removes the chains of the religious expectation of perfection, which is not authentic or even possible. Or as the eloquent, John Steinbeck says in his novel *East of Eden*, “And now that you don’t have to be perfect, you can be good” (p. 583).

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