

Chapter 9. The Examined Life – Process, Perhaps Not Content

“The truth is my fellow Athenians, that only God is wise. What the oracle meant was that what we know is little or nothing. Apollo didn't just mean me; I am just an example. What God means is, “The wise know their own wisdom is worth no more than anyone's.””

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates, as quoted in Plato's Apology)

Having discussed the four main themes (the *content* of our research conversation) emerging from the research process, it may seem out of place to introduce a *process* discussion only at the end of this thesis. The unique outcome in this research project, in my mind, however was introduced when Millicinda remarked that *what really enhanced their experience of meaningfulness was the reflecting process itself*. Therefore, it seems as if the emerging content was of interest, but what really made the difference – the *action moment* in the action research process – was the very process of reflection, the examining of our own lives.

9.1 Overview of the chapter

In this chapter, reflection as meaning making will be discussed from a narrative perspective, exploring whether narrative meaning making and reflective practice are congruent. Next, the chapter will report the voices of the research participants on reflecting as a process of creating a “life that matters”.

Once the researcher narratives have been reported and discussed, the voices of “outside witnesses” will be invited in. This will take the form of listening to published reflection discourses.

In conclusion, the objectives of the chapter will be revisited and the conversation handed over to the next chapter.

9.2 Narrative perspective on reflection

Although we did not intentionally set out to confirm that narrative reflection would contribute to an experience of meaningfulness, in retrospect I suppose we should not have been surprised that the reflective process was identified as being meaning making or meaning enhancing in itself. Our research process was conducted as conversations interspersed with times for reflection, much like the self-reflecting in the process of narrative therapy as described by Freedman and Combs

(1996:191-193). They describe how such a self-reflection would *flow among deconstruction, openings, preference, story development and reflection*. In this way they (1996:192) propose that the participants become *an audience to themselves*, performing meaning on any emerging stories as they do. It should be evident from the descriptions of our conversations how these elements were recruited into the research process described in this document.

The complete narrative process may therefore be described as a linguistic dance of co-reflection breaking away into self-reflection only to meet up again in ever growing rhythms of meaning. This suggests that alongside Bruner's landscapes of action and meaning we may have to consider another hermeneutical dimension – that of reflection. In both our co-reflections and self-reflection we should therefore be sensitive to our landscapes of action and meaning as they are storying meaningful lives.

When reflection as questioning is introduced into the narrative conversation, one has to mention the work of Karl Tomm (1987, 1988). In his three part discussion of Interventive Interviewing, he discusses various questioning approaches available to the therapist. In parts 1 and 2 of this series, he discusses reflexive questioning. Tomm (1988: 8) draws attention to the facilitative intention of reflexive questioning. The role of the therapist (or in our case the facilitating researcher) is described as similar to that of a guide or a coach. In this fashion, the resources of the clients or co-researchers are acknowledged and allowed to *be mobilised*. He (1987b: 169) also alluded to the circular effect of the reflexive process – meanings generated in one iteration turn back to inform the next iteration in a cyclical fashion. Throughout this paper the relationship between reflection and meaning is strongly suggested.

Lyle (2009) discusses narrative reflection from a *becoming* perspective. Quoting Bloom (1998), she (2009:294) describes this meaning making process as a *journey of becoming*. The outcome of this process is then described as a *deepened self-knowledge*. Building on her proposed use of narrative as research methodology, it may then be suggested that narrative provides the understanding or meaning framework for our reflective inquiries. Lyle (2009:296) describes the interaction between narrative and reflexive inquiry as requiring three things. Applied to our quest for a Life that Matters, these may explained as follows: first there is the reflection on historical events which may have informed a meaningful life; second, these moments are described as mediated in language; the last requirement is then the *unpacking* of these events, *accounting for them* and reflecting upon the language used to describe them.

During these periods of reflection, my fellow researchers were invited to respond on some questions directed to explore further some of the discourses arising from our conversations. This reflective process may be described as a guided reflection, as I facilitated and directed to a large extent what we were reflecting on. As such the reflective process may perhaps be considered not to have been fully democratic or participatory.

9.3 The voices of the research participants on reflection and meaning

Once the suggestion that the reflective process or examining process was actually experienced as meaning enhancing by the study group, I invited them to reflect on this and sent the following e-mail:

What was the most meaning-enhancing aspect of the process so far? Was it the findings or was it the reflective process?

Millicinda replied as follows:

I think both were meaningful. I did find some new things about myself in the findings, but also the reflective process got me thinking about certain topics that I normally would not say aloud or share with others. I believe this is healthy for everyone to go through.

Estelle on the other hand posted the reply underneath:

I would say that it was the reflective process. The reflection shows a broader opinion on the subject with different views and experiences. This creates more subjects concerning the findings which could even lead to more findings.

As is suggested by these two examples of the replies from the study group, learning from each other what constituted meaningfulness in their lives, did enhance their experience of meaningfulness in their own lives, but the process of reflecting in itself also became a meaning making process.

Perhaps we can associate this with Bruner's landscapes again: meaning making seems to take place in the interaction which hermeneutically happens between or connects the landscapes of action (*reflection* on meaningful lives in our study) and landscapes of meaning or identity (the *themes* or discourses identified to be involved in the constitution of meaningful lives or *a Life that Matters*).

My fellow researchers furthermore indicated that their lives are so directed at going forward, being busy, making progress, that we never take time to stand still and reflect (on the meaning of our lives). In this study, they were actually *forced* to contemplate what constitutes meaningful lives.

9.4 Other voices on reflection and contemplation as meaning making practice

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor the quest of each student to find what gives their life meaning and integrity, and what allows them to feel connected to what is most precious for them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gift to nourish the world. (Kessler, 1999, p. 33).

In order to include the voices from other disciplines, I did a literature search starting with Google Scholar and expanding the search to the E-Journals available through the library of the University of Pretoria. The key words initially included combinations of “examined life”, unexamined life”, “meaningful”, meaning and “reflect”. These searches did not produce much information. Later I stumbled across some references to *existential phenomenology*⁸² and *reflexive inquiry*⁸³. These

⁸² Edward Tiryakian (1965) describes Existential Phenomenology (EP) as the synthesis of existential philosophy and Husserl’s phenomenological method. According to Yalom (1980) the four main areas of examination within existentialism are meaning (vs. meaninglessness), freedom (vs. confinement), death (vs. life), and isolation (vs. inclusion) - our study of meaningfulness is therefore related to one of the main discourses in existentialism.

The early 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, posthumously regarded as the father of existentialism, maintained that the individual solely has the responsibilities of giving one's own life meaning and living that life passionately and sincerely.

Other philosophers associated with Existentialism include Nietzsche, Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Sartre and Camus.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>), Phenomenology may be understood initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. Literally, phenomenology is the study of “phenomena”: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. This field of philosophy is then to be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy: ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), ethics (the study of right and wrong action).

Frankl (1988:7) captures the idea of meaning making through phenomenology in the following quote:

resulted in more hits, but not many of these were associated with “life meaning” or generally the experience of meaningfulness.

Dan Haybron (2006: 109) suggested that we can reflect on our lives from different perspectives and these perspectives can result in different outcomes to these reflective processes. In the paper on Life Satisfaction, Ethical Reflection and the Science of Happiness Haybron specifically referred to different levels of satisfaction resulting from the perspectives premising these processes.

Hartman (2008: 315) goes beyond the well-known Socratic philosophy of “The unexamined life is not worth living”. He suggests that the unsuccessfully examined life is not worth much either. This is of course introducing a value judgement into the discourse of the examined life. The question that now needs to be answered is “How do we understand ‘success’ in a successfully examined life?” My view about this matter is that we will be generating only more and more questions and fewer answers as we pursue this line of thought. The process of reflection is in my opinion more important than the actual outcome of the process.

Socrates made his statement above in a context of virtues or a virtue ethics, and perhaps more specifically aimed at the eudaimonia which was introduced in Chapter 7. Eudaimonia as a reference to the *good life* is a reference to a Life that Matters, a meaningful life. The focus is therefore not a successful life, which will invariably be categorising and invoking various power discourses into the discussion, but a consideration of meaning.

Nozick (1989:276) suggests that it may be somewhat harsh to imply that the *unexamined life* is not worth living at all, but he contends that examining one’s life may lead to a more fully lived life. By examining his own life, he intends *taking it off auto-pilot*. According to Nozick to live an examined life is to make a *life portrait*. This process of examination or reflection becomes an act of appropriation, becoming agentic in painting an authentic life portrait. In narrative terms we would perhaps prefer the metaphor of an autobiography and authoring our own lives. Reflecting, according to Nozick, therefore transforms the process of having life happening to us to being a participant in our own

Phenomenology is an attempt to describe the way in which man understands himself, in which he interprets his own existence, far from preconceived patterns of interpretation and explanation such as are furnished by psychodynamic or socio-economic hypotheses.

Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existential_phenomenology) describes EP as follows:

*Existential phenomenology is a **philosophical** current inspired by **Martin Heidegger**'s 1927 work **Sein und Zeit** (*Being and Time*) and influenced by the existential work of **Søren Kierkegaard** and the phenomenological work of **Edmund Husserl**.*

⁸³ Reflexive Inquiry (RI) draws on the spirit of five overlapping theoretical traditions--systemic, social constructionist, critical, appreciative, and complexity.

lives. Nozick proposes that in this process of examining our lives, we come to care not only about the *amount and distribution of happiness* but also about the *content of the life story, the narrative direction of life moving in the right direction* (1989:100-101, 112).

In an interesting discussion of Jewish Bioethics, Knobel (2001) suggests that Judaism is about personal and collective meaning of life, that it begins with a reflection on texts and that this takes the form of a *conversation between texts of our people and the texts our lives*.

In her book on phenomenology, Barbara Couture (1998:100) suggests that *phenomenological reflection* is the way through which we experience our lives as being meaningful⁸⁴. She describes reflection as *the means through which we establish a relationship* with the world, but then she adds that it is also an *act through which we understand the world*. She posits that meaning comes about only as the result *perpetual, persistent and mutual conscious reflection of individual agents* (1998:102). Elsewhere though (1998:101, 102), she does allude to the relational or social nature of reflection, saying that reflecting is *fundamentally social* which cannot develop meaning through *detachment*. Couture then describes how reflection *culminates ideally in a shared consciousness* with others (1998:109). This corresponds to the thoughts on reflection expressed by Teilhard de Chardin (1964: 133) which are discussed later.

Couture proceeds to posit that phenomenology describes how *truth is experienced as a psychical phenomenon through our reflection* upon our subjective experiences (1998:99). She also posits that our understanding of reality resides in our reflective processes (1998:90). The aim of reflection, she proposes, is to achieve a unity with others – *with all living things and with God* (1998: 106). Reflection is a dynamic process and as we continually reflect, new worlds keep opening up to us (1998:77). This is not merely a cognitive process, as it involves sharing of reflections and in the process learning to understand ourselves in speech acts, rather than in thoughts (1998:80). Throughout her book, there are 10 examples of how narrative is used as the epistemology and also the context within which this reflective process takes place.

In his book *The Future of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin (1964:133) states quite unequivocally that reflection should not be an individual process. He suggests that it can only be developed *in communion with others*, referring to it as a *social phenomenon*. Later on (1964:158) he adds another dimension to reflection, referring to *the spiritual phenomenon* of reflection. He attributes some important qualities to reflection, suggesting that it has the potential to draw us closer to one another, assisting communication, and ultimately of uniting us.

⁸⁴ Meaningful is understood by Couture (1998:171) to refer to that which we value in our own lives.

Roebben (2002) quotes two Dutch researchers Janssen and Prins (2000) who indicated that there seems to exist

a primacy of action over reflection and of annexing religious traditions as a 'toolkit of symbols' (2000:12)

In this paper Roebben (2002:8) suggests that young people are not looking for meaning of things, but that they are *using meaning*. This suggests a consumerism of meaning as compared to a production of meaning.

What this seems to suggest to me is that we are living in a society where movement and action are associated with powerful discourses of progress, achievement and identity, and as a result we do not allow ourselves the "luxury" to stand still and reflect. This leads to both a certain discomfort with reflection as well as the assumption that we do not really know how to reflect on life discourses. Naturally we therefore need to be guided by someone in the reflective process.

9.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to explore a unique outcome resulting from the research conversation. Reflecting on one's own life was identified as one of the main contributors to my fellow researchers' experience of meaningfulness. Listening to their stories of reflection it was suggested that reflection and new knowledge about meaningfulness complemented each other in the creation of existential meaning.

This led the study group to reflect on narrative as a methodology and epistemology for reflection. Our examination of narrative suggested that it seems to be congruent with a reflexive inquiry process, generating new life meanings through a process of interpretation. Humankind as interpreting animals has received some attention in the literature. One interpreter of Nietzsche has for instance suggested that he portrayed humankind as *homo hermeneuticus*⁸⁵ (Green, 2000: 186). The processes of reflection and hermeneutics therefore seem to be intimately involved in narrative reflexivity.

When we extended the conversation to also include voices from other disciplines, the relationship between examining, reflecting or reflexive inquiry and meaningful living was strongly supported by voices from phenomenology and existentialism (or combined as phenomenological existentialism).

⁸⁵ See also "Homo Hermeneuticus: The Location of Language in Human Agency," in *Philosophical Anthropology: Reviewed and Renewed*, L. Moss/M. Guttmann (eds.), The MIT Press.

Although these philosophical discourses might at first not have seemed to be compatible or congruent with the narrative approach, it was indicated that in their base arguments they share a common quest.

In our last chapter which follows, I shall invite my fellow researchers to have the last say in this discussion before we hand the conversation over to a wider audience.

Chapter 10. Handing the story over...

The last words belong to my fellow researchers. I have asked them for their comments and reflections on the research process or aspects of the process which were meaningful to them. Here are some of their reports:

10.1 Estelle on Externalizing

Personally, I found externalizing very useful. It is a great way of separating yourself from the problem and realizing that you are not the problem. I found that it gives you a better perspective on the situation. When you separate yourself from the problem, you feel that you have the power to solve it.

I have been depressed for a few years now, and I have to drink Anti-Depressant pills. This is due to a chemical reaction in my brain. My mother and grandmother suffer from depression as well. At first I couldn't understand what was wrong with me. I had to see a psychologist, but didn't feel the need for continuing my sessions with her. I felt that I knew it was my low self-esteem and pressure that caused this and that only I could fix it. Soon I started feeling that I'm not capable of dealing with my emotions, and started doubting myself.

When I started externalizing the problem (it is a chemical reaction) I felt that there wasn't really something wrong with me. The depression is the problem. When you can find out what causes the depression for instance, you can externalize that, seeing that depression is anger turned inwards (internalizing). Today I have a positive outlook on it. I am in control of the depression and even though I can't make it disappear, I understand it better and handle it better.

By practicing to externalize a problem, you can handle situations better and get a better perspective on it. When you externalize yourself from something, you don't get emotionally involved in the situation. When you get too involved emotionally, you lose certain outlooks and perspectives. We all know that there is a big difference between being in a certain situation and seeing a certain situation take place.

She also offered the following feedback:

I found yesterday's meeting very helpful – especially the part about difficult situations that occur in our lives – we absolutely control the outcome. If you see yourself as a failure you only make life harder for yourself. People and circumstances can bring someone down – in the end,

the outcome lies with you. You have to stick with what you believe in and not let people's words or comments affect you. When we go through difficult times we search for our purpose and self worth in life. You should determine your values and standards and keep it in mind the next time you go through a difficult time or when someone makes a comment on you as person.

10.2 Jurie's last comments

Francois's "Meaningfulness in Life" sessions made me to start thinking again about my dreams and my purpose in life. It made me even more aware how much meaningfulness we can add to other people's lives through appreciating them, sometimes just a smile to bright up someone's day or to take a bunch of flowers to a close friend or relative.

It was inspiring to see someone (Francois) with so much passion in what he's doing. A dream he's pursuing and that the end result will be so rewarding.

It made me more aware of my colleagues' needs.

We as human beings all wants to be loved, appreciated and encouraged.

I prefer one on one sessions much more that group sessions even though I've learned so much more about my colleagues during the group sessions.

Thank you Francois for all the value you've added to my life through living your dream to find the meaningfulness of life.

And also

The research process has had the result that he was encouraged to think about things.

Too often one just carries on day after day in a mindless way, not knowing where one is heading. This study has had the effect that I became more open and sensitive to other people and their input.

10.3 Millicinda's poem

KEEPING THE FAITH

I have seen how fragile life can be,

And I have seen how short life can be,

I have seen happiness,

I have seen sadness,

I have had hell and heaven,

I have seen how in a wink of an eye everything can change,

BUT

I have learned, above all to be grateful ...

I have learned to treasure even the smallest of things,

AND

I pray that God will continue His work in me,

And I pray that He will show me the way all the way,

And reveal His ultimate plan for me,

ABOVE ALL

I believe all things will come to pass

GOD IS ALWAYS IN CONTROL

But some of the co-researchers also expressed experiences of meaninglessness. An example of such an experiences is described by Millicinda below:

I was just thinking while we were in our meeting today that we strive to find meaningfulness in everything that happens and my experience is just that sometimes things do happen which to me are totally UNmeaningfull – we mustn't have the false expectation that all things can be explained and boxed into a certain meaningfulness.

I didn't find any meaning in my sister dying at the age of 27 – still today. I know that some people's death can mean something to other people, can even be the turning points in their lives but for me her death was totally meaningless and me trying to find the meaning in her death for the last 4 years only had me feeling miserable. I am not going to go with a just any explanation of meaningfulness to ease my pain, I want something authentic, and I have learned only to accept the fact that she died without personal meaning to myself. I realise that God's plan will determine the outcome, whom am I to question Him, because doubting this event and the fact that it had to happen will make me doubt whether God is really in control or not.

But why would we include accounts of meaninglessness in a study of what constitutes a Life that Matters or a meaningful life then? Even as our problem stories should never become totalitarian, so will our preferred stories never be totalitarian. Our multi-storied realities will always include *discordant* or UNmeaningful events. It is our relationship with these events, though, which will change. Our intentional states of identity (White, 2007:103-106) are created by the *choices* we make from these multi-storied possible realities. Thus meaning becomes an intentional state understanding.

10.4 Personal reflection on my co-researchers' stories of meaningfulness

10.4.1 Local treasures of meaning

As I indicated previously, we as a co-research team agreed on what narrative discourses originated from the original personal conversations. In the process, though, part of the richness of individuals' own narratives of meaning was lost. For me, those individual stories of identity, spirituality, purpose or relationship were local treasures of meaningfulness. Those stories once again underscored the local aspect of constructs. Even though most of the fellow researchers suggested that their lives were meaningful when they meant something to other people, their local understandings of what that meant to them individually all differed, and in this difference the precious narratives were grounded.

10.4.2 Not-Knowing

The benefit of entering the process not-knowing was made possible by a research approach (and perhaps even an epistemology) which paid more attention to process than to content or "models". In the process of adopting a not-knowing position, I am convinced that more space was created for my fellow researchers' stories. This also constructed an ethic of respectfulness and appreciation.

10.4.3 Power Relations

Although I was always sensitive to power discourses, the not-knowing position also assisted in both sensitising all the participants to power relations – like the power potentially positioned in the research facilitator’s position.

10.4.4 De-centred position of the research facilitator

My experience in the research process was that de-centring myself in the research process by

- Not adopting an expert position;
- Introducing any references from the literature as “outsider witnesses” rather than totalising, definitive knowledge, thus
- Using (these) references as acknowledgement and appreciative texts;
- Adopting a position of facilitator and co-researcher and not that of the objective observer;
- Using reflective questioning in supporting dialogues which opened up meaning making narratives, rather than administering questionnaires for instance and
- Maintaining a culture of curiosity rather than testing preconceived hypotheses about “a life that matters”,

Opened up space for multi-loguing in a respectful manner in which all my fellow researchers felt safe enough to voice their opinions on what constitutes a life that matters. This not only wove a lattice of narratives on existential meaning, but also sometimes allowed the voices of some of the co-researchers to be heard for the first time. A general ethic of appreciation, affirmation and recognition spontaneously evolved as a result of this.

10.4.5 Externalisation

Externalisation was adopted by the co-researchers as a social skill which they could introduce into their workplace and also their personal lives. They expressed appreciation for the difference externalisation made and told landscape of action stories in support (see Estelle’s letter above).

Externalisation allowed us to introduce sensitive and controversial stories into the conversations in a safe and non-offensive way.

10.5 Reflection on the voices of literature in the discussion of meaning

The only learning about existential meaning did not come from the co-researchers though. The voices of the literature added more meaning discourses to the meaningfulness conversation. In the

chapter on a theological positioning of the study, we listened to the voices of Rahner, Bloch, Moltmann, Brümmer and Tillich, introducing their own meaningfulness stories.

To this effect Rahner suggested that meaningfulness is intimately connected to our experiences of God in the world and links the meaning conversation to Grace and God's Purpose for human beings. Purpose was later taken up as a meaning discourse introduced by my fellow researchers as well. This was discussed at length in Chapter Seven. Hope was introduced into the conversation as a meaning discourse by Bloch and Moltmann, proposing that the capacity to anticipate, wish for and hope may be central to our life meanings. Brümmer suggested that theology may provide the pictures of life within which we can position our lives meaningfully.⁸⁶ According to Brümmer, meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live. Paul Tillich suggested that non-being or rather the anxiety of non-being was the primary concern in the quest for meaningful living. Creative participation in meaningful living was indicated by Tillich to be key to existential meaning. Tillich concludes that that which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be.

As is suggested by the footnote below the discourses of meaning introduced in the literature resonated well with the meaning stories of my fellow researchers. Inviting the voices of the literature into the research conversation in this way provided outsider witnesses who confirmed, authenticated and respected the stories of the fellow researchers.

10.6 A proposed methodology for facilitating participants' quest for meaningfulness

The praxis which was co-developed by my fellow researchers and me in this study in our quest for a more meaningful life, started off as a story gathering exercise. All the co-researchers were encouraged to bring along their stories of meaning. This was done in personal interviews with individual participants to the study. These stories were then collated and introduced to the research group. This group functioned as a reflective team, acknowledging the stories brought along by their fellow researchers. This process then proceeded to group the stories into meaning discourses. These discourses were subsequently thickened by means of landscape of action stories and a re-

⁸⁶ Here we are reminded of a landscape of meaning against which we position our actions in a meaningful way. This is facilitated by what I refer to as a hermeneutical bridge, or a process of reflection – the topic of Chapter Nine.

membering process. This acknowledged the landscape of identity implicit in the stories. The discourses eventually exposed intentions to meaning in the lives of my co-researchers.

In an individual process with one client at a time, the process can unfold as follows:

- Mine the stories describing the meaning discontents in the life of the client
- Name these discontents in “experience-near” language
- Explore what the effects of these discontents are; journey through the landscapes of relationships, spirituality and any discourses the client wishes to introduce
- Venture cautiously into the “absent-but-implicit”, the not-yet-said in the meaning conversation: this can take the form of co-examining the intentions and hopes, the wishes and desires which in their absence created the anxiety or frustration which necessitated the conversation in the first place
- Re-member these intentional positions by means of outsider witnesses; invite witnesses to the nature of these intentional positions into the conversation, physically or symbolically.
- Create histories for these meaning discourses
- Make sure that these new meaning discourses are preferred realities for the “meaning” client.

This process may potentially extend over a number of conversations and these physical appointments should be connected by means of reflective and reflexive communication in between.

10.7 How I perceive the contribution this study may have made to the broader narrative of meaningfulness

This study may serve to revive the conversation both in the practical theology discourse and the pastoral theology discourse. It positions existential meaning within an uncertainty discourse and suggests that reflexive co-construction in the manner suggested previously, can contribute to the meaning enhancing multilogue.

Meaning making is introduced in a non-totalitarian way, strongly suggesting that an experience of meaningful living is possible even in postmodern times often described as confusing and potentially relativistically or nihilistically meaningless.

This study creates space for spirituality in the existential meaning conversation; perhaps even strongly proclaiming that it should be part of any conversation on meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness has been introduced as a local experience devoid of the power discourses of meta narratives and do-it-yourself recipes.

Local process rather than universal content was positioned as meaning enhancing in the study, thus opening space for local life knowledges and negating the need to conform to meta narratives of meaningfulness which may in effect be alienating and disempowering in that they relegate the life knowledges of objectified people into anecdotal and fictional.

10.8 My own experience of the study

My own need to experience the research of which I was a participant as meaningful was satisfied and confirmed by my co-researchers' narrations of how they experienced the research process. My trust in the ethic evolving from the participatory action research process as well as the critical relation constructionist epistemology I adopted as a paradigm for the study, has been strengthened and my intentional position rewarded or acknowledged by the appreciative and affirmative responses of my fellow researchers.

For me, doctoral studies have always been part of a personal meaning story in the space that it creates for growth and respectful curiosity. I can therefore call it a life ambition fulfilled.

Even if this study does not lead to academic recognition in the form of a post-graduate degree, I will be content with the function and position I have been privileged to have in a community of practice which embarked on a journey to explore what makes life more meaningful.

I would therefore like to thank everyone who helped to make this such a meaningful process.